

A STUDY OF SHELLEY'S DRAMA THE CENCI

BY

ERNEST SUTHERLAND BATES

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY, IN THE FACULTY
OF PHILOSOPHY, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

NEW YORK

1908

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A. H. THORNDIKE,
Secretary.

PREFACE

There is probably no author in the whole range of English literature about whose work more contradictory and unsatisfactory judgments have been expressed than those which have appeared in the case of Shelley. Criticism, both favorable and unfavorable, has tended constantly to be extravagant and polemical, dealing in superlatives and no positives. The quality of his style is such as either greatly to attract or greatly to repel; it leaves none indifferent. For this reason, objective, non-partisan studies of his poetry as a whole, or of individual poems, are very few. Furthermore, there has been all too much impressionism in the criticism which he has received, and all too little attention to details.

"The Cenci" offers particular attractions for the kind of close intensive study which is now needed in the case of all Shelley's poems. Its style shows so little of its author's usual radiant imagery that one can approach it in a mood of some calmness; it has hitherto received even less adequate critical attention than any other of the poet's major works; and its significance for our knowledge of Shelley's total artistic power is, owing to its dramatic form, very great. For these reasons "The Cenci" was selected as the subject of the present monograph. I shall be well satisfied if the latter may prove in its limited degree some slight aid to a more impartial appreciation than has yet been given to one whose merits I could wish to see admired with less of idolatry, and whose defects certainly ought to be censured with less of prejudice, than has hitherto usually been the case.

My great indebtedness to the various members of the English department at Columbia University for constant criticism, suggestion, and encouragement will be understood by all who have ever worked with them: it would be vain to attempt in a few lines to indicate the multifarious nature of this indebtedness. But I cannot refrain from particularizing the especial aid ren-

dered by Professor W. P. Trent, to whom the inception of the work was largely due, and by Professor Brander Matthews and Professor Thorndike, whose suggestions upon the dramatic aspects of the subject have been invaluable; also, my study of Shelley's style owes much to the judicious advice of Dr. G. P. Krapp; and in many minor points throughout the dissertation I have profited from the friendly counsel of Dr. W. W. Lawrence. I wish also to express my thanks to Professor Richard Holbrook, of Bryn Mawr College, who generously placed in my hands his notes upon various Italian documents connected with the history of the Cenci family.

E. S. B.

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY,
December 14, 1907.

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I

STATEMENT OF PROBLEMS

"The Cenci" has long been recognized as one of Shelley's most important works, and by some has even been considered the greatest of all. Yet of definite criticism or thorough analysis it has received far less than "Queen Mab," "Alastor," "Prometheus Unbound," "Epipsychidion," or "Adonais." Aside from the interesting but bigoted contemporary criticism, and the almost equally prejudiced newspaper reviews of the performance by the Shelley Society in 1886, we are confined for our information to a single monograph dealing mainly with the drama's relations to its source,¹ and to scattered paragraphs here and there in biographies and essays. Even these paragraphs often seem more perfunctory than in the case of Shelley's other works, as if the writers had merely glanced at "The Cenci" en route from the more congenial fields in the "Prometheus" to those in the "Epipsychidion."

For this comparative neglect of the play by Shelley students there are several reasons. Its subject-matter, incest, is not an attractive or a significant theme for the world to-day, and the interest of Byron and Shelley in the topic inevitably seems to us morbid and unhealthy. This in itself may have been sufficient to prevent many critics from making a careful examination of the play. More important still is the fact that "The Cenci" is in its style less individually characteristic of the author than is any other of his mature works. In this regard one writer has asserted: "Were the tragedy now first discovered in manuscript, and did we only know that it was written by someone who was alive in 1819, Shelley is one of the last persons to whom, from the internal evidence of his other poems, it would be assigned."² Had this writer been asked to what other contemporary poet it would rather have been assigned, he might have found it difficult to reply, but his

¹ Wilhelm Wagner *Shelley's 'The Cenci'*, Rostock 1903.

² George Stillman Hillard, *Six Months in Italy*, London 1853, ii. 335-36.

statement is only an exaggeration, not a perversion, of the truth. The lyrical ecstasy and the rapturous melody, the profuse imagery and the impassioned description, which give Shelley's poetry its greatest individual charm, are all moderated and restrained in "The Cenci" to accord with the dramatic purpose. The metaphysical pantheism of Shelley, which to his more enthusiastic followers makes his poetry a source of religious inspiration, is hardly apparent, and the political socialism so prominent elsewhere is here quite absent. Under these circumstances it is perhaps no wonder that "The Cenci" has received less attention than its importance and intrinsic merits deserve.

Its importance consists chiefly in the light which it throws upon the total nature of Shelley's genius. In the first place, "The Cenci" is of especial interest as one of the poet's few attempts to handle a historical subject. The question at once arises, Does the treatment confirm or modify the impression, gained from Shelley's biography, of his general inability to estimate correctly the significance of past history? How far, if at all, does it show evidence of what we may call "historical-mindedness"? In the second place, and much more to be emphasized, is the importance derived from the fact that "The Cenci" was Shelley's one completed attempt in regular drama. The question as to how far he succeeded in this is full of meaning for our estimate of his poetic power and potentiality, and it is one not to be answered by sweeping generalization, but by a detailed examination of the relation of "The Cenci" to the chief factors involved in dramatic composition. What of the structure, and of the influences which determined it? What of the characters, and of the reasons which led Shelley to treat them as he has done? What of the style, and of its suitability to dramatic needs? What of the meter, and of the means by which Shelley, master of rhythm and melody as he was, here obtained the metrical effects which he desired? Finally, what are we to say of the play as a whole, of its relative literary and dramatic value, and of its significance in our understanding of Shelley as man and as poet? These are the chief problems of which an attempted solution is set forth in the following pages.

II

COMPOSITION AND PUBLICATION OF "THE CENCI"

Shelley was probably the most rapid writer among all the great English poets, with the exception of Shakespeare and Byron. In the composition of "The Cenci" he surpassed even his own normal rate of speed. While the "Revolt of Islam" and the first three acts of "Prometheus Unbound" had occupied five and six months respectively, the time spent in the actual composition of "The Cenci" was only two months,¹ although its general theme, to be sure, had been in the poet's mind for a considerably longer period.

Soon after Shelley's first arrival in Italy an Italian manuscript account of the wrongs of Beatrice Cenci, called a "Relation of the Death of the Family of the Cenci," came temporarily into his hands at Leghorn. On May 25, 1818,² a little before their departure for the Baths of Lucca, Mrs. Shelley made a copy of this manuscript, and, then or later, she or Shelley³ translated it into English. The poet at once perceived the fitness of the subject for tragedy and urged it upon his wife, who, however, distrusted her own powers, and declined the task. The mere story evidently did not have sufficient fascination for Shelley at this time to inspire his own imagination to the point of writing, and the subject seems to have slipped into the background of his consciousness until the following

¹ Shelley to Peacock, Aug. 22 (?), 1819 (Peacock, *Works*, III. 465).

² Mrs. Shelley's note to *The Cenci* in her 1839 editions gives Rome, 1819, as the place and time of Shelley's first acquaintance with the manuscript, but the contemporary evidence of her journal gives the earlier date (Dowden, *Life of Shelley*, ii. 277).

³ The translation has been usually attributed to Shelley, but his own statement to Peacock is simply, "I send you a translation of the Italian manuscript on which my play is founded" (Shelley to Peacock, August 22 (?), 1819). Robert Browning thought he remembered having heard somewhere that the translation was by Mrs. Shelley (Browning, *Works*, Camberwell ed., ix. 305).

spring at Rome. Here he found a universal acquaintance with the story, and everywhere the same interest and sympathy with the unfortunate heroine. This convinced him that the plot already possessed that inestimable dramatic advantage, common to the Greek and some Elizabethan plays, of previous existence in the popular consciousness as a source of tragic emotion.

But the real inspiration for his work seems to have come from the supposed portrait¹ of Beatrice Cenci by Guido Reni in the Barberini² palace. At that time there was no doubt entertained as to the authenticity of the picture, painted, according to tradition, in prison the day before the execution. From Shelley's description in the preface to his drama it is easy to see how his imagination was fired:

"The portrait of Beatrice at the Colonna Palace is admirable as a work of art; it was made by Guido during her confinement in prison. But it is most interesting as a just representation of one of the loveliest specimens of the workmanship of Nature. There is a fixed and pale composure upon the features; she seems sad and stricken down in spirit, yet the despair thus expressed is lightened by the patience of gentleness. Her head is bound with folds of white drapery from which the yellow strings of her golden hair escape and fall about her neck. The moulding of her face is exquisitely delicate; the eyebrows are distinct and arched; the lips have that permanent meaning of imagination and sensibility which suf-

¹ The authenticity of the picture was disproved by A. Bertolotti in his "Francesco Cenci e la sua famiglia" in 1879. He found that the first payment made to Guido Reni for painting in Rome was dated 1608, nine years after Beatrice's execution, and that there was no reason to believe that he had ever painted there before that year. Catalogues of the Barberini Palace in 1604 and 1623 made no mention of any picture of Beatrice Cenci. The *Edinburgh Review*, in a discussion of Bertolotti's book, pointed out the further fact that the same head appears in other pictures by Guido,—in the Orsini Palace, in the Rospigliosi Palace, and in the chapel attached to the Church of St. Gregory (*Edinburgh Review*, cxlix, 33-34). But it is possible that the painting is by some imitator of Guido's style.

² Shelley and Mrs. Shelley both speak of the portrait as in the Colonna Palace, but it is at present in the Barberini, and was seen there as early as 1823 by Henri Beyle. There is no record of its ever having been in the Colonna Palace.

fering has not repressed and which it seems as if death scarcely could extinguish. Her forehead is large and clear; her eyes, which we are told were remarkable for their vivacity, are swollen with weeping and lustreless, but beautifully tender and serene. In the whole mien there is a simplicity and dignity which, united with her exquisite loveliness and deep sorrow, are inexpressibly pathetic. Beatrice Cenci appears to have been one of those rare persons in whom energy and gentleness dwell together without destroying one another; her nature was simple and profound. The crimes and miseries in which she was an actor and a sufferer are as the mask and the mantle in which circumstances clothed her for her impersonation on the scene of the world."

It is worth while to compare with this description one by another great writer equally sensitive to the charm of the picture, but differing from Shelley in his interpretation. Hawthorne, in the seventh chapter of "*The Marble Faun*" represents his heroine, Hilda, to have painted a copy of Guido's Beatrice, which he thus describes: "The picture represented simply a female head; a very youthful, girlish, perfectly beautiful face, enveloped in white drapery, from beneath which strayed a lock or two of what seemed a rich, though hidden luxuriance of auburn hair. The eyes were large and brown, and met those of the spectator, but evidently with a strange, ineffectual effort to escape. There was a little redness about the eyes, very slightly indicated, so that you would question whether or no the girl had been weeping. The whole face was quiet; there was no distortion or disturbance of any single feature; nor was it easy to see why the expression was not cheerful, or why a single touch of the artist's pencil should not brighten it into joyousness. But, in fact, it was the very saddest picture ever painted or conceived; it involved an unfathomable depth of sorrow, the sense of which came to the observer by a sort of intuition. It was a sorrow that removed this beautiful girl out of the sphere of humanity, and set her in a far-off region, the remoteness of which—while yet her face is so close before us—makes us shiver as at a spectre."

Between these two descriptions there are to be noted slight

differences of observation, in regard to the exact color of the hair, its arrangement, and the evidences of weeping ;—but the radical divergence lies in the interpretation. Hawthorne notices chiefly the situation, and the isolation of Beatrice from normal human life ; Shelley feels rather the nobility of her character, and regards her as an example of excellence for human life. This view, more ideal and less true to the circumstances, was, as we shall see, fundamental in Shelley's handling of the character.

The hold which the story had now taken upon the poet was increased by a visit which he and his wife paid about this time to the ruins of the Cenci Palace.¹ His mind was now moved to the point of creation, and he saw in these rather squalid buildings the solemn and fitting scene of tragedy. In his preface he describes them thus :

“The Cenci Palace is of great extent ; and, though in part modernized, there yet remains a vast and gloomy pile of feudal architecture in the same state as during the dreadful scenes which are the subject of this tragedy. The Palace is situated in an obscure corner of Rome, near the quarter of the Jews, and from the upper windows you see the immense ruins of Mount Palatine half hidden under their profuse overgrowth of trees. There is a court in one part of the Palace (perhaps that in which Cenci built the Chapel to St. Thomas), supported by granite columns and adorned with antique friezes of fine workmanship, and built up, according to the ancient Italian fashion, with balcony over balcony of openwork. One of the gates of the Palace formed of immense stones and leading through a passage, dark and lofty and opening into gloomy subterranean chambers, struck me particularly.”

How these same buildings appear to the ordinary man who carries no unborn drama in his mind may be seen from the following description by one James Henry Dixon :² “I have just been visiting the principal scene of Shelley's tragedy, ‘Beatrice Cenci.’ I had some little difficulty in finding the place ; but, at last, after walking through several narrow, tor-

¹ Dowden, *Life*, ii. 277.

² *American Bibliopolist*, vii. 165, June 1875.

tuous, and dirty streets—and such are not wanting in Rome—I arrived at a small piazza, or square, in the Ghetto, or Jewish quarter, called Piazza di Cenci. In this square is the Jews' synagogue, with a clock and bell, and the Università Israelitica. They are neat buildings, and form a pleasing contrast to the wretched pile which was once the residence of the noble family of the Cenci. In the centre of the square is a ruined fountain, waterless, and with a circular basin choked with mud. On the right hand side of the square is a large part of the palace. It is now divided into dwelling-houses, and let out in tenements to a class who have, evidently, small claim to either rank or station. . . . One side of the square is occupied by the Church of St. Thomas, which the infamous Francis Cenci is said to have erected as some atonement for his horrible crimes. The church is ruinous and disused. Like the palace, it is divided and let out in tenements to poor people, whose broken flower-pots crowded the window-sills. . . . From Shelley's description, in the preface to his tragedy, I expected to find a very different sort of building—in fact, to encounter an Italian palazzo of the Middle Ages, with huge Cyclopean walls and Byzantine doorways and windows—a sort of Roman Udolpho. All this I was led to expect from the poet's talk about gloom, vastness, extent, etc. . . . Had Shelley not named the 'Church of St. Thomas,' I should have supposed that he had made some mistake, and had either visited another neighboring palace, or trusted to some erroneous description. There is not the slightest resemblance between Shelley's account and the actuality."

We learn from Mrs. Shelley's journal that by May 14, five weeks after the completion of "Prometheus Unbound" in its first form, Shelley was at work upon his new drama.¹ From the beginning his wife was enthusiastic in her support, and together the two planned the arrangement of the various scenes. The work was interrupted, however, in the first week of June by the sudden illness of their three year old son William. For sixty consecutive hours Shelley watched at the bed-side, and as a result physical illness was added to the grief caused by the boy's death. He was the last of the three chil-

¹ Dowden, *Life*, ii. 277.

dren whom Mary had borne to Shelley, and had been especially dear to both. The heart-sick parents felt the scene of their loss to be intolerable, and left Rome forever.

A refuge was found at Villa Valsovano, a small house which they rented, about half way between Leghorn and Monte Nero. Here they passed the summer, and Shelley spent his days in writing, varied by the study of Spanish and the reading of Calderon under the instruction of their neighbor at Leghorn, Mrs. Maria Gisborne.

The villa was cheerfully situated in the center of a small farm. Italian peasants worked and sang outside the windows during the day, while at night the adjacent hedges glowed with fire-flies, save when the quiet of the scene was broken by one of the splendid thunder storms frequent in that region. There was a small, glass-covered terrace at the top of the house, commanding a wide view of the fertile Italian meadows and the near-by sea, and this was taken by Shelley as his work-room. The season proved exceptionally hot, and often the little room became so like an oven as to be intolerable to all but the poet, who basked in the heat of the glaring sunshine, and under its influence felt in some measure his health and happiness return. In this romantic situation the bulk of "The Cenci" was written. There can be no better testimony to the stern self-control which in this instance the poet was exerting over his fancy, than the fact that of all the images which the charm of his surroundings must have aroused in his mind, not one was allowed to creep into the drama. Neither the cheerfulness of the peasant's singing, nor the majestic terror of the thunder storms left the slightest echo in his work; in all of his long poems hitherto he had indulged in exquisite pictures of ocean or lake; now, with the Mediterranean before his very eyes, he refrained.

By July the work was sufficiently advanced for Shelley to write to his friend Thomas Love Peacock, asking him if possible to secure its presentation at Covent Garden.¹ His letter stated that he believed his tragedy not inferior in composition to any modern English play except Coleridge's "Remorse"; that he had taken particular pains to adapt it to the stage; that

¹ Shelley to Peacock, July 1819 (Shelley's *Works*, Forman ed. viii, 112).

the leading role might even seem to have been written for the actress Miss O'Neil; but that he doubted whether the subject of incest, however delicately handled, would be allowed presentation on the English stage. Along with this letter Shelley sent the translation of the Italian manuscript which had been made. On August 8 the play was finished, and later in the same month copied and corrected.¹

Shelley desired to have his tragedy printed in order to enable the theatrical managers to judge of it more easily. He found that in Italy this would cost only about half as much as in England. The printer to whom he entrusted the work is not certainly known, but he was probably Masi of Leghorn, who had brought out several English books a short time before at more reasonable rates than those of the London houses.² Only 250 copies of "The Cenci" were printed. About the middle of October these were sent to Shelley's English publisher, Ollier, in a sealed box with instructions not to open until further orders, Shelley being aware of the theatrical manager's prejudice against plays which had been already published. Peacock now did his duty and attempted to have the play brought out at Covent Garden. Mr. Harris, the manager, perused it and replied that instead of permitting Miss O'Neil to act the part of Beatrice, he could not think of letting her even read it. At the same time he expressed his appreciation of the dramatic power of the author, and said that if Shelley would write a tragedy on some other subject, he would willingly accept it.³

"The Cenci" may possibly have been offered also to Drury Lane. Shelley in a letter to Ollier mentioned this theater as the one which had refused the play,⁴ but the statement may very likely have been due to his habitual carelessness.

At all events, nothing came of the effort to have the drama produced, and Ollier was told to publish the 250 copies that he had on hand. Shelley had desired an engraving of Guido's

¹ Dowden, ii. 279.

² *Ibid.*

³ Peacock, *Works*, iii. 435.

⁴ Shelley to Ollier, March 13, 1820 (*Shelley Memorials*, p. 151).

picture for a frontispiece, but the undertaking was found to be too expensive. He had also intended the translation of the Italian manuscript to be prefixed to the play, but for some reason this also was not done. The drama appeared in March, 1820, with a warm dedication to Leigh Hunt, and, like Shelley's other publications, with a descriptive and interpretative preface.

III

LITERARY CRITICISM

1. Contemporary

The first reviewer to notice the play was Leigh Hunt in a paragraph of the *Examiner* (March 19, 1820), where he hailed it as unquestionably "the greatest dramatic production of the day." A little later (April 6, 1820) he wrote personally to Shelley and his wife:

"Shelley's tragedy is out and flourishing. I recently took, as his friend and representative, congratulations on all sides, upon the dedication, the preface, and the drama. Ollier, who thought it would not sell, had to tell Henry Hunt the other day, that the first edition had almost all gone off already. . . . What a noble book, Shelley, have you given us! What a true, stately, and yet affectionate mixture of poetry, philosophy, and human nature, and horror, and all-redeeming sweetness of intention, for there is an undersong of suggestion through it all, that sings, as it were, after the storm is over, like a brook in April. But you will see what I say about it in the next *Examiner* but one. I gave a brief notice of it two or three weeks ago, announcing this longer one, which will just precede, I hope, the second edition."¹

The promised review did not appear, however, until July 19 and 26, and then in the *Indicator*. Meanwhile hostile criticisms appeared in the *Literary Gazette*,² the *Monthly Magazine*,³ the *New Monthly Magazine*,⁴ and the *London Magazine*.⁵

The review in the *Literary Gazette* began as follows: "Of all the abominations which intellectual perversion, and poetical

¹ Leigh Hunt, *Correspondence*, i. 154.

² April 1, 1820.

³ No. 338, p. 260, April 1820.

⁴ Vol. xiii. pp. 550-553, May 1, 1820.

⁵ Vol. i. pp. 546-555, May 1820.

atheism, have produced in our times, this tragedy appears to us to be the most abominable. . . . We protest most solemnly, that when we reached the last page of this play, our minds were so impressed with its odious and infernal character that we could not believe it to be written by a mortal being for the gratification of his fellow-creatures on this earth: it seemed to be the production of a fiend, and calculated for the entertainment of devils in hell . . . guilt so atrocious as that which he paints in every one of his dramatic personages, never had either individual or aggregate existence. No; the whole design, and every part of it, is a libel upon humanity; the conception of a brain not only distempered, but familiar with infamous images, and accursed contemplations. What adds to the shocking effect is the perpetual use of the sacred name of God, and incessant appeals to the Saviour of the Universe." The reviewer then went on to point out in each individual case the utter wickedness of the characters, cited the horror of the banquet scene as an example of the debasement of Shelley's intellect, and closed triumphantly with a citation of "the dying infidelity of that paragon of parricides,"—Beatrice's speech, "Whatever comes my heart shall sink no more" (V. iv. 78–89). The only passage of quotable worth which the reviewer found in the whole play was Beatrice's description of the ravine where her father was to be murdered (III. i. 243–265).

The brief notice in the *Monthly Magazine* condescended to no details, but contented itself with stigmatizing the play as nonsense and raving, intended to inspire terror but really arousing only horror and disgust.

The *New Monthly* was but slightly more favorable in tone. It, too, objected to the author's strange perversity of taste which made his tragedy a source of wonder and disgust, and it held that the exhibition of such crimes was radically immoral, tending to destroy that unconsciousness of evil which it believed to be the surest safeguard. It congratulated the poet, indeed, on having shown the ability to leave his "cold abstractions" and deal with actual people, but its view of the two leading characters was again unfriendly. "With the exception

of Cenci, who is half maniac and half fiend, his persons speak and act like creatures of flesh and blood, not like the problems of strange philosophy set in motion by galvanic art. The heroine, Beatrice, is, however, distinguished only from the multitude of her sex by her singular beauty and sufferings. In destroying her father she seems impelled by madness rather than will, and in her fate excites pity more by her situation than her virtues. Instead of avowing the deed, and asserting its justice, as would be strictly natural for one who had committed such a crime for such a cause—she tries to avoid death by the meanest arts of falsehood, and encourages her accomplices to endure the extremities of torture rather than implicate her by confession." The banquet scene in the first act the reviewer characterized as "a wanton piece of absurdity, which could have nothing but its improbability to recommend it for adoption." He cited, however, with literary approval the quiet pathos of the close, Beatrice's description of the ravine, and Giacomo's soliloquy on the dying flame, but ended with the customary criticism that Shelley's many faults were due to his failure to understand religious truth.

The London Magazine found the cause of the numerous defects in the drama to be the fundamental immorality of the writer. Shelley's personal vanity, it said, led him to strive at all costs to be different from other men; his perverted and diseased character led to a fondness for rotten and wicked themes. Such a man as Cenci, if he ever existed, was simply mad, and no fit subject for tragic treatment. The wickedness of the Pope as here represented would have been unbelievable save by men of the "toleration" and "enlarged liberality" of Mr. Shelley and his friends. The whole work, in brief, showed a "radical foulness of moral complexion." Curiously enough, however, the reviewer found the language in which this moral foulness was conveyed to be "vigorous, clear, manly, . . . correct, and simple," and he made numerous quotations for literary praise.

With the fierceness of these moralistic denunciations of Shelley in our ears, Leigh Hunt's defense of his friend in the Indicator, vigorous enough actually, seems tame by compari-

son. He devoted himself to the ethical aspects of the case, and asserted that, "The moral of the terrible story of 'The Cenci,' whether told in history or poetry, is a lesson against the enormities arising from bad education, from long-indulged self-will, from the impunities of too great wealth and authority, and tyrannical and degrading notions of the Supreme Being." He attempted to refute the charge against Beatrice, by arguing that her denial of the crime was dictated by a horror of her act, so intense in character that she found it necessary to regard the event as a hideous dream, that by no possibility could ever really have happened (an interpretation which unfortunately has no support from any passage in the play). Hunt, like the rest, picked out the description of the ravine for special praise, and made a number of other long quotations.

Such were the criticisms of 1820. In 1821 two more appeared: one in the *Monthly Review*,¹ the other in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*.² The former began: "As the genius of this writer grows on us, most heartily do we wish that we were able to say, his good sense and judgment grow with it—but, alas for the imperfections of the brightest minds, the reverse in this instance is the case; and the extravagance and wildness of Mr. Shelley's first flights yield to the present, not only in their own eccentric character but in other most objectionable points." The reviewer then proceeded to attack the bad taste shown in the choice of subject matter, and the adoption of "the exploded Wordsworthian heresy" that poetic language should be the language of daily life. He ascribed Shelley's chief faults to Doubt and Vanity. He acknowledged literary power in the work and quoted two passages: a portion of the dialogue between Beatrice and Lucretia in the second act, and Beatrice's lament "Whatever comes my heart shall sink no more" in the fifth act.

It was left for Blackwood's to add the bitterest invectives to the chorus of anathemas directed against Shelley. After whetting his knife on the "Adonais," the reviewer, probably Wilson, turned to "The Cenci" in this fashion: "But Percy

¹ Vol. xciv. pp. 161-8, February 1821.

² Vol. x., December 1821.

Bysshe has figured as a sentimentalist before, and we can quote largely without putting him to the blush by praise. What follows illustrates his power over the language of passion. In the Cenci, Beatrice is condemned to die for parricide,—a situation that, in a true poet, might awaken a noble succession of distressful thought. The mingling of remorse, natural affection, woman's horror at murder, and alternate melancholy and fear at the prospect of the grave, in Percy Bysshe works up only this frigid rant;

'How comes this hair undone?
Its wandering strings must be what blind me so,
And yet I tied it fast . . .
The sunshine on the floor is black! The air
Is changed to vapours such as the dead breathe
In charnel pits! Pah! I am choked! There creeps
A clinging, black, contaminating mist
About me—'tis substantial, heavy, thick;
I can not pluck it from me, for it glues
My fingers and my limbs to one another,
And eats into my sinews, and dissolves
My flesh to a pollution, poisoning
The subtle, pure, and inmost spirit of life!'

So much for the history of 'Glue'—and so much easier is it to rake together the vulgar vocabulary of rottenness and reptilism, than to paint the workings of the mind. This raving is such as perhaps no excess of madness ever raved, except in the imagination of a Cockney, determined to be as mad as possible and opulent in his recollections of the shambles.

"In the same play we have a specimen of his 'art of description.' He tells of a ravine—

'And in its depth there is a mighty rock,
Which has, from unimaginable years,
Sustained itself with *terror and with toil*
Over a gulf, and with the *agony*
With which it clings seems slowly coming down;
Even as a wretched soul hour after hour
Clings to the mass of life; yet, clinging, *leans*;
And, leaning, makes *more dark* the dread abyss
In which it fears to fall; beneath this crag
Huge as despair, as if in *weariness*,
The *melancholy* mountain *yawns*; below,'

"And all this is done by a rock—What is to be thought of the *terror* of this novel sufferer—its *toil*—the *agony* with which so sensitive a personage clings to its paternal support, from *unimaginable* years? The magnitude of this melancholy and injured monster is happily measured by its being the exact *size of despair*. Soul becomes substantial and *darkens* a *dread abyss*. Such are Cockney darings before 'the gods, and columns' that abhor mediocrity. And is it to this dreary nonsense that is to be attached the name of poetry?"¹

The few contemporary writers who were enabled by ability or disposition to criticize Shelley's works at all fairly were, for the most part, embraced in his own small circle of acquaintances. Their opinions of "The Cenci," while not unanimous, were probably upon the whole more favorable than to any other of the author's works. The drama was clearly Mrs. Shelley's favorite among all her husband's productions, and she cites the last act as distinctly "the finest thing he ever wrote."² Leigh Hunt's first admiration seems only to have increased with time. In 1828 he wrote:

"Mr. Shelley ought to have written nothing but dramas, interspersed with such lyrics as these ['The fountains mingle with the river'—quoted just before]. Perhaps had he lived, he would have done so; for, after all, he was but young; and he had friends of that opinion whom he was much inclined to agree with. The fragment of the tragedy of 'Charles the First' makes us long for more of it. With all his republicanism he would have done justice to Charles, as well as to Pym and Hampden. His completest production is unquestionably the tragedy of 'The Cenci.' The objections to the subject are, on the face of them, not altogether unfounded; but they ought

¹ Accuracy was always a very unimportant canon in Blackwood's literary criticism. The first passage quoted does not occur, as the reviewer says it does, after Beatrice's condemnation, but immediately after Cenci's crime, when the situation is of course entirely different. And in the second passage although there is a certain clumsiness in Shelley's wording, the idea is clear enough that it is the rock and not the soul that "makes more dark the dread abyss." But the need of understanding an author before ridiculing him never occurred to Blackwood's.

² Shelley's *Works*, 1839 ed. vol. ii. p. 279.

not to weigh with those who have no scruple in grappling with any of the subjects of our old English drama, and know how to think of the great ends of poetry in a liberal and masculine manner."¹

And again in 1844:

"What a pity he did not live to produce a hundred such [lyrics as 'The Skylark']; or to mingle briefer lyrics, as beautiful as Shakespere's with tragedies which Shakespere himself might have welcomed! for assuredly, had he lived, he would have been the greatest dramatic writer since the days of Elizabeth, if indeed he has not abundantly proved himself such in his tragedy of 'The Cenci.' Unfortunately, in his indignation against every conceivable form of oppression, he took a subject for that play too much resembling one which Shakespere had taken in his youth,² and still more unsuitable to the stage; otherwise, besides grandeur and terror, there are things in it lovely as heart can worship, and the author showed himself able to draw both men and women, whose names would have been 'familiar in our mouths as household words.'"³

Horace Smith, the author of "Brambletye House," preferred "The Cenci" to the "Prometheus Unbound" because of its greater human interest.⁴ Thomas Love Peacock did not like the play at first,⁵ but later he acknowledged it to be a work of great dramatic power, and asserted his belief that, had Shelley lived, he would have become one of the masters of dramatic art.⁶ Of Shelley's less important literary friends, Edward Williams, the author of several unpublished dramas, especially praised "The Cenci,"⁷ while Edward Trelawny, strangely enough for a man of his temperament, preferred the

¹ Hunt, *Lord Byron and His Contemporaries*, 1828, 2d ed. i. 366-67.

² Hunt must refer to "Pericles," supposing it a play of Shakespere's youth, but the resemblance to "The Cenci" is by no means so striking as he implies.

³ Hunt, *Imagination and Fancy*, New York 1845, p. 216.

⁴ *Fraser's Magazine*, lxi. 105, January 1860.

⁵ Shelley to Mrs. Gisborne, October 13 or 14, 1819 (*Shelley's Works*, Forman ed. viii. 132).

⁶ *Fraser's Magazine*, lxi. 105, January 1860.

⁷ Trelawny, *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author*, 1878, Preface p. xv.

"Epipsychidion,"¹ and Medwin, though admiring "The Cenci," considered the dramatic form too opposed to Shelley's natural genius to have allowed him ever to do his best work in that field.²

Of Byron's opinion we have several versions. According to Medwin's repeated statement, he considered it as "perhaps the best tragedy modern times have produced," "a play,—not a poem like Remorse and Fazio."³ According to Shelley, "he was loud . . . in censure."⁴ According to himself (in a letter to Richard Belgrave Hoppner), "His [Shelley's] tragedy is sad work,"⁵ and (in a letter to Shelley), "I read *Cenci*—but, besides that I think the *subject* essentially *undramatic*, I am not an admirer of your old dramatists *as models*. I deny that the English have hitherto had a drama at all. Your *Cenci*, however, was a work of power and poetry."⁶

To Keats, Shelley sent a presentation copy, and received in reply a somewhat oracular criticism:

"I received a copy of 'The Cenci,' as from yourself, from Hunt. There is only one part of it I am judge of—the poetry and dramatic effect, which by many spirits nowadays is considered the Mammon. A modern work, it is said, must have a purpose, which may be the God. An artist must serve Mammon; he must have self-concentration—selfishness, perhaps. You, I am sure, will forgive me for sincerely remarking that you might curb your magnanimity and be more of an artist and load every rift of your subject with ore. The thought of such discipline must fall like cold chains upon you, who perhaps never sat with your wings furled for six months together. And is not this extraordinary talk for the writer of 'Endymion,' whose mind was like a pack of scattered cards?"⁷

¹ Trelawny, *Records*, Preface p. xv.

² Medwin, *Life of Shelley*, 1847, i. 349.

³ Medwin, *Byron at Pisa*, New York 1824, pp. 61, 182.

⁴ Shelley to Hunt, August 26, 1821 (Shelley's *Works*, Forman ed. viii. 237.

⁵ Byron's *Works*, Prothero ed. v. 74 (September 10, 1820).

⁶ *Ibid.*, v. 268 (April 26, 1821).

⁷ Keats to Shelley (Shelley's *Poetical Works*, Centenary ed. ii. 469).

Of Shelley's other great contemporaries, Coleridge has left no recorded judgment in regard to the play, and Wordsworth, in a brief conversation with Trelawny in the summer of 1820, only the single phrase, "Won't do."¹

Shelley's own regard for his play seems to have gradually diminished. While still in the first fervor of composition, he had written to Hunt (Aug. 15, 1819): "I am contemplating another work, totally different from anything you might consider that I should write; of a more popular kind; and, if anything of mine could deserve attention, of higher claims."² A suggestion of depreciation appeared in a letter to Ollier on March 6 of the following year: "Cenci is written for the multitude and ought to sell well."³ On May 1 he wrote of it to Medwin disparagingly: "I have just published a tragedy called 'The Cenci.' . . . It is dismal enough. My chief endeavor was to produce a delineation of passions which I had never participated in. . . ."⁴ His final judgment was given in a conversation with Trelawny in the spring of 1822: "The Cenci is a work of art; it is not colored by my feelings nor obscured by my metaphysics. I don't think much of it. It gave me less trouble than anything I have written of the same length. . . . [The "Prometheus"] is original; and cost me severe mental labor. Authors, like mothers, prefer the children who have given them most trouble."⁵

2. Later

In his judgment of the comparative value of the "Prometheus Unbound" and "The Cenci," Shelley stood opposed to most of his contemporaries, but it has been his view, not theirs, which has prevailed in later criticism. Those Shelley students who have given any comparative estimate of the value of his works have been nearly unanimous in according the

¹ Trelawny, *Recollections of the last Days of Shelley and Byron*, 1858, ch. i. p. 13.

² Shelley to Hunt, August 15, 1819 (Shelley's *Works*, Forman ed. viii. 115).

³ *Shelley Memorials*, p. 150.

⁴ Trelawny, *Records*, ii. 35-36.

⁵ *Ibid.*, i. 117-18.

preëminence among them all to the "Prometheus."¹ On the other hand, most of these critics have accorded "The Cenci," also, a high literary and dramatic value, though without much attempt to discriminate the two. Preëminence over the contemporary tragedies of Byron and Coleridge, and the later dramas of Browning and Tennyson seems to have been tacitly accorded; the play has been called by some critics "the greatest tragedy of modern times,"² by others, "the greatest English tragedy since Shakespere."³ The poet Swinburne proclaims it, "the greatest tragedy that had been written in any language for upwards of two centuries."⁴ Along with this enthusiasm in generalization, however, there has gone an avoidance of detailed criticism more noticeable than in the case of any other of Shelley's important works. There have not appeared many criticisms more full or adequate than this early one by Lady Shelley in her "Shelley Memorials" of 1858. "The play is in truth, a wonderful instance of mature judgment and self-control—the more extraordinary when we reflect that the author was barely seven and twenty when he wrote it, and that the peculiar tendency of his genius was towards an excessive affluence of imagination and fancy, and the embodiment of thoughts the most evanescent and impalpable in forms the most gorgeous and transcendent. 'The Cenci' occupies entirely different ground. Everywhere we feel the earth under our feet. The characters are not personifications of abstract ideas, but are true human beings, speaking, indeed, a language exalted by passion, but nevertheless a language which has its roots in nature, and draws its sustenance from life. Awful are those revelations of the monstrous heart of the old man; tremendous in their hopeless agony and desolation those staggerings of the mind of Beatrice on the brink of madness; angelical, in its serene redemption from transitory error, that

¹ R. W. Griswold, 1875; G. B. Smith, 1877; R. P. Scott, 1878; J. A. Symonds, 1879; Edward Dowden, 1886; H. S. Salt, 1887; Wm. Sharp, 1887; Helene Richter, 1898; G. E. Woodberry, 1901.

² R. W. Griswold, 1875; Wm. M. Rossetti, 1878; R. P. Scott, 1878; H. S. Salt, 1887; Wm. Sharp, 1887.

³ Geo. Griffin, 1845; Lady Shelley, 1858; J. A. Symonds, 1879.

⁴ A. C. Swinburne, *Miscellanies*, p. 120.

spirit of resignation and immortal love which rises, towards the close of the play, out of the hell of the earlier parts, and finds its most lovely expression in the final words. Never did poet more exquisitely show the triumph of Good over Evil than Shelley has done in that hushed and sacred ending. It is a voice out of the very depths of the suffering patience of humanity."¹

In this summary we see that the literary excellence of "The Cenci" is taken for granted, and that its dramatic value is not analyzed, while the whole attention is devoted to one element of the play, namely, the characters. The same holds good in large part of the brief references to "The Cenci" that we find scattered through the other various books and articles on Shelley.

In the majority of these the reality and dramatic power of the two chief characters, Beatrice and Count Cenci, is emphatically recognized.² For example, Todhunter in his "Study of Shelley," after giving an outline of the play, says "even Webster himself cannot compare with Shelley for delicacy and truth to nature,"³ and adds later, "the characters of Beatrice and her father are, indeed, evidence of a power of individual portraiture far above that which we find in the ordinary Elizabethan drama."⁴ He speaks of "Shelley's perfect dramatic inspiration," and points out that "the character of Beatrice rises to sublimity at the end, as her father's did at the beginning."⁵

The minor characters have been less favorably treated. A writer in the North British Review in 1870 even asserted that they are mere "theatrical properties: Giacomo . . . the stage dupe; Orsino . . . the stage traitor who tempts his victims as nearly as possible as King John tempts Hubert, or as Richard tempts Buckingham; Olimpio and Marzio . . . stage assass-

¹ *Shelley Memorials*, p. 129.

² Middleton, 1858; Lady Shelley, 1858; G. B. Smith, 1877; W. M. Rossetti, 1878; R. P. Scott, 1878; J. Todhunter, 1880; G. Sarrazin, 1885; H. S. Salt, 1887; G. E. Woodberry, 1901.

³ Todhunter, *Study of Shelley*, 1880, p. 121.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

sins; Camillo . . . the stage ecclesiastic.”¹ On the other hand, Miss Helene Richter has pointed out the careful way in which the minor characters are grouped as foils to the chief ones,² while Professor Woodberry tells us that “the characterization . . . of Orsino and Giacomo is studied with attention and ingenuity.”³

The dramatic power of the blank verse in “The Cenci” was acknowledged, as we have seen, even by the contemporary reviewers at the time of publication. Later criticism has in general continued to praise it. Concerning its value as pure poetry, Dr. Anster’s thesis in an article on the “Life and Writings of Shelley” is notable: “It is impossible for us, within the limits to which we must confine ourselves, to speak as we could wish of Shelley’s mastery over language—which was gradually becoming perfect. The exquisite subtlety of his thoughts was such as to demand every aid that words could give, and the result was a power over language such as no English poet has before attained. This, had Shelley lived, would probably have made him our greatest poet, for there is no one of his poems that gives in any degree an adequate measure of his intellectual power. We feel of him as if he had created a language, in which he did not live long enough to have written anything. . . . The effect of such poems as he did write was diminished by his lavish expenditure of this rich and overflowing language, which goes beyond the thought, and instead of expressing conceals it or magnifies it into undue pomp. Each successive work exhibited increased power of condensation—and language, by doing no more than its proper business, had a thousandfold more power. Of this ‘The Cenci’ is a remarkable instance. It is Shelley’s greatest poem. The others are in comparison with it, scarcely more than the exercises of a boy, disciplining himself for the tasks of an after period of life. In modern poetry there is nothing equal to the passage describing the scene of the proposed murder—shall we not say execution—of the father. . . . In this passage

¹ *North British Review*, liii. 52.

² H. Richter, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Weimar 1898, p. 405.

³ Shelley’s *Works*, Cambridge ed., p. 626.

the description of the rock overhanging the precipice, and the simile forced as it were on the imagination of the speaker, by the circumstances in which she is compelled to think of her father's guilt, is absolutely the finest thing we have ever read."¹

On the other hand, the dramatic power of the verse, the realism of the characters, the stage value of the action, all are embraced in one sweeping attack by John M. Robertson, when he concludes a brilliant wholesale denunciation of Shelley's major poems in the following manner: "One after one, on examination, the long poems for which so much has been claimed are found to be faulty, diffuse, charmless, ill-considered, wearisome—so much 'rhymed English,' as Emerson bluntly put it. 'The Cenci' best bears study, and it must be allowed that Shelley has handled his ill-chosen subject with no small energy and pains. It is sometimes claimed for him that his tragedy places him next to Shakespere among modern English poets; but to pronounce such a judgment on the datum that no tragedy of importance had been produced between Shakespere and Shelley is to use misleading language."² 'The Cenci' has indeed a quality of emotion and stress not to be found in the intermediate work; but all the same it fails to take rank as an original and successful drama. Half a dozen times over we find direct imitations of Shakespere, but of Shaksperian concision and lifelikeness there is little. It has the literary faults of the 'poetic drama' without that terse intensity of style which in Shakspere seems to fuse the most extravagant imagery into living speech. The poet tells us in his preface that he has 'avoided with great care in writing this play the introduction of what is called mere poetry'; but in point of fact the declamation is constantly in Shelley's own poetic style; and he introduces the merest of 'mere poetry' just where it is most inadmissible, as when Camillo is made to say of Marzio:

¹ *North British Review*, viii. November 1847.

² To imply, as Mr. Robertson does, that there is "no tragedy of importance" to be found in the works of Beaumont and Fletcher, Webster Massinger, Ford, Otway, and Dryden is also to "use misleading language."

"He shrinks from her regard like autumn's leaf
From the keen breath of the serenest north."

Most fatal defect of all, Beatrice is quite imperfectly individualized, being here a personage of all too Shelleyan fecundity of phrase, who in her supreme moments, with one exception, substitutes verbose violence for the terrible simplicity of genuine feeling in extremity. The exception is the last speech of all, which is entirely and astonishingly excellent. These lines and some others, including those introducing Beatrice's song, do recall Shakspeare; and suggest questions as to Shelley's cerebral variability; but our final judgment must be that while 'The Cenci,' despite its impracticable subject, is in respect of literary quality more readable than any other of Shelley's longer works, it is not fated to become a classic. In its kind it is superseded by Browning."¹

"The Cenci" does not seem to be a particular favorite with the chief American student of Shelley, Professor Woodberry, whose note in the Cambridge edition is very brief and somewhat perfunctory. He sums up the final impression of the play in the following significant but one-sided statement: "The total effect is of intense and awful gloom. . . . In it culminates that fascination of horror in Shelley which was as characteristic as his worship of beauty and love, though it is less omnipresent in his poetry."²

The last noteworthy discussion of 'The Cenci' appears in an interesting contrast between it and the early work of Shakspeare, in Mr. A. A. Jack's recent monograph on Shelley. Mr. Jack finds that, "Shelley has a cooler grasp of the tragic issue; he is more absorbed in the meaning of his tragedy than the young Shakspeare ever was." On the other hand, there is an opulence of dramatic material in Shakspeare which we do not find in Shelley. "The Cenci is a tragedy in line, of one attitude," and "we feel as if Shelley's voice were exhausted in that note." Mr. Jack also asserts that the earlier part of the tragedy, in which Cenci is of chief importance, is the

¹ J. M. Robertson, *New Essays towards a Critical Method*, London 1897, pp. 233-35.

² Shelley's *Works*, 1901, Cambridge ed., p. 626.

part which is most characteristic of Shelley, but is least dramatic.¹

With this final utterance of literary criticism, which is in direct opposition to the impression of the dramatic critics who saw the play performed in 1886, we may fittingly turn back to the story of that production, the most interesting event in the history of Shelley's drama. Since "The Cenci" was originally written for the stage, the judgment of the theater is important—in all that concerns its dramatic power far more important than the judgment of literary critics.

¹ A. A. Jack, *Shelley, An Essay*, London 1904, p. 120.

IV

PRODUCTION OF "THE CENCI" IN 1886

The manifest histrionic opportunities in "The Cenci" have often attracted the attention of actors. Macready, after he had left the stage, is reported to have said that he would return if he could have the opportunity to appear as Count Cenci.¹ Samuel Phelps carefully examined the play with a view to its production, but came to the conclusion that its dramatic interest terminated with the death of Count Cenci.² Miss Glyn (Mrs. Dallas) had a lifelong ambition to play the part of Beatrice, but her managers constantly refused.³ Miss Genevieve Ward also desired to appear in this role, and at one time seriously discussed the question of giving a private performance.⁴ In July, 1885, at a meeting of the Wagner Society, Miss Alma Murray (Mrs. Alfred Forman), a young actress of talent, gave a dramatic reading of the last scene of "The Cenci."⁵

It was left for the Shelley Society, however, in the first year of its organization actually to bring the play as a whole upon the stage. In doing so they met with many difficulties. Of course the old charge of the immorality of the play was revived. The newspapers held aloof from the undertaking, and the Lord Chancellor refused to permit a public performance. The Shelley Society then resorted to the plan of renting a theater for a private performance, with admission by invitation only. They found no trouble in procuring capable actors to give their services. Miss Alma Murray, who had gained considerable reputation as the Constance of Browning's "In a Balcony," and had on the very first day of the Shelley Society's

¹ Shelley Society, *Original Prospectus*, December 8, 1885.

² *Shelley Society Note Book*, p. 188.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁵ *Shelley Society Note Book*, p. 11.

existence received an invitation to play the part of Beatrice, now responded with enthusiasm and delight. Mr. Hermann Vezin, one of the most talented actors of the English stage, undertook the part of Count Cenci.

In preparation for the performance, Messrs. H. Buxton Forman and Alfred Forman published an edition of the play. As a frontispiece, Mr. W. B. Scott made an etching of Guido's Beatrice, and thus at last another of Shelley's original desires was fulfilled. The editors prefaced the text with a brief aesthetic discussion, pointing out the high degree in which the play aroused that pity and fear which Aristotle deemed essential to great tragedy, and ranking it in this respect with the "Oedipus Tyrannus," "Medea," "King Lear," and "Phèdre." The Shelley translation of the Italian manuscript account was given in an appendix. There were no notes of any kind in this edition, which was designed chiefly as a popular handbook for the performance.

On the afternoon of Friday, May 7, 1886, at the Grand Theater, Islington, before an audience of something more than twenty-five hundred invited guests, the play was presented. The mounting and costuming were careful, though not so elaborate as to give the scenery any independent value. The drama was given literally according to the published text, without "cuts" or changes of any kind, save for a verse Prologue by Mr. John Todhunter, and a division into six acts instead of five—the division coming in the middle of the third act. The performance occupied nearly four hours, but this length of time, very unusual in a modern drama, did not seem to weary the audience, which, from the beginning to the end, listened spell-bound, rewarding every act with tumults of applause. At the end of the play, when Miss Murray was called back to the stage, the enthusiasm reached its climax, and the entire audience rose spontaneously and cheered.¹ The comments in the lobbies after the play were loud and enthusiastic.² Judging from the general attitude of that audience, one would have been justified in supposing that "The Cenci"

¹ *Shelley Society Note Book*, 51-53.

² *Ibid.*, 65.

was a great dramatic success.¹ But the theatrical critics were not yet heard from—and when their verdict appeared it told a very different tale.

The success of the particular performance before its special audience was acknowledged, and unanimously enthusiastic praise was accorded to the acting, especially to that of Miss Murray, which the *Weekly Dispatch* called the finest piece of tragic impersonation that had been seen for twenty-five years. But the play itself was condemned by the vast majority of the critics as entirely undramatic. Certain scenes, as presented, had indeed impressed them, notably Beatrice's appeal to the guests at the banquet, in the first act; the climax at the beginning of the third act—according to *Le Figaro* "la plus belle scène" of the performance; Cenci's curse in the fourth act; and the final speech of the play; but the merit of these scenes was attributed rather to the actors than to the drama itself. The play aroused in the breasts of the theatrical critics, for the most part, only the emotions of horror,² disgust³ and weariness.⁴ They stigmatized it as gloomy,⁵ and as most unwholesome.⁶ The beauty and pathos which had been found in the drama by literary critics were hardly mentioned. The journalists went on to assert that the success of the play before a packed house of Shelley admirers, inclined to judge from a literary rather than a dramatic standpoint, could in no wise be accepted as indicative of genuine dramatic merit.⁷

Unfortunately for a just estimate of the play it is evident from the tone of the theatrical criticisms that if the Shelley

¹ The following papers referred to the favorable attitude of the audience: *Hornsey and Finsbury Park Journal*, May 18; *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper*, May 9; *Oxford Magazine*, May 12; *Western Daily Mercury*, May 8; *Athenaeum*, May 15; *Echo*, May 8; *Evening News*, May 8; *Saturday Review*, May 15.

² *Daily Chronicle*, *Echo*, *Evening News*, *Liverpool Courier*, *Lloyd's Weekly*, *Morning Post*, *Times*.

³ *Times*.

⁴ *Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Morning Post*.

⁵ *Evening News*, *Observer*.

⁶ *Daily Chronicle*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Hornsey and Finsbury Park Journal*, *Lloyd's Weekly*, *Scotsman*, *Times*.

Athenaeum, *Daily Chronicle*, *Echo*, *Saturday Review*.

Society went with favorable prepossessions, most of the journalists suffered from at least equally violent unfavorable ones. Some of them began by speaking of the play as "Shelley's hideous tragedy,"¹ and others by insisting that it was morally unfit for performance.² The majority attacked the play primarily on moral, and only secondarily on dramatic grounds, and the dramatic objections were often dragged in for the manifest purpose of bolstering up the moral prejudice.

Yet, on the other hand, even in the few cases where this moral prejudice was inoperative, the journalists were virtually united in condemnation of the play. The following from the skilled hand of Mr. William Archer—the last man, surely, to be accused of prudishness—is in perfect harmony with the general tenor of his colleagues' remarks, and may be taken as the most authoritative utterance of the theatrical press on this occasion:

"The reasons which render 'The Cenci' an impossible play are not far to seek. Partly from inexperience, partly from having to deal with things unspeakable and à fortiori unactable, Shelley handled his romantic theme in a pseudo-classic fashion. Without attaining the repose, dignity, and perfect form of classicism, he sacrificed the life, movement, relief, variety of the romantic drama. Though he knew 'Faust' he seems to have overlooked the invaluable maxim of the Manager in the second prologue:

"Besonders aber lasst genug geschehn!

Man kommt zu schaun, man will am liebsten sehn."

Nothing happens in 'The Cenci,' or rather everything happens behind the scenes. 'Hamlet' and 'Macbeth' are brilliant panoramic displays compared with 'The Cenci.' . . . A play of pure recitation—Racine's 'Phèdre,' for example, or Goethe's 'Iphigenie'—has for me, I confess, a peculiar charm, but that is because the emotion, however intense, is subdued and harmonized by a lofty repose, a chiselled perfection, of ideal utterance. 'Iphigenie auf Tauris,' adequately acted, resembles an

¹ *Daily Chronicle, Daily Telegraph.*

² *Echo, Scotsman, Times.*

alto-rilievo endowed with life and motion, yet sacrificing not a jot of its calm nobility. 'The Cenci' is like the Laocoon group set writhing and roaring for three or four mortal hours by the spell of some wanton magician. It has this advantage over other recent successes of ennui, that its language is as perspicuous as it is vigorous, and its verse, though unequal, freely and finely modulated. No one who reads it intelligently can doubt that there were in Shelley the makings of a dramatist; but after seeing it on the stage, one has to read it over again to reassure oneself of the fact."¹

During the two years of 1887 and 1888 the administrative committee of the Shelley Society cherished the hope of repeating the performance, but in neither year were there sufficient funds forthcoming, and the idea had to be abandoned. In 1892 on the occasion of Shelley's Centenary an effort was again made to have the play presented on the stage, but the obstacles in the way of obtaining a theater proved to be too great.² From the latter date until the present year there has been no known attempt at performance of "The Cenci."

¹ *The World*, May 12, 1886.

² Shelley's *Poetical Works*, Centenary ed. ii. 465.

V

SHELLEY'S CENCI AND THE CENCI OF HISTORY

That Shelley believed in the strict historical accuracy of the manuscript narrative upon which he based his play there can be no question. He had no reason to do otherwise. The narrative, although it makes no overt claim to possess contemporary authority, nevertheless reads as if written at the time by one personally familiar with the events recorded, and with its simple yet graphic realism and unartificial mention of minute details it produces an effect almost as convincing as a passage from Defoe.

After Shelley's drama had given a new interest to the subject of "The Cenci" other manuscripts, similar and dissimilar, gradually found their way into print.¹ Although the publishers of the majority claimed for them historical accuracy based on more or less personal investigation, one and all they were either discredited or superseded by the work of Signor Berto-

¹ The more important of these accounts are to be found in the following books¹ and articles:

Stendhal (Henri Marie Beyle), *Les Cenci*, in *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1837; republished in *Chroniques et Nouvelles*, 1855, and in Stendhal's *Œuvres*, 1888, i. 197-231.

Keppel Craven, *Excursions in the Abruzzi and Northern Provinces of Naples*, London 1838 i. 250 ff.

Val. Parisot, Article on Beatrice Cenci in *Michaud's Biographie Universelle*, Paris 1844, vii. 317-21.

J. Whittle, *Bentley's Miscellany*, August 1847.

James Whiteside, *Italy in the Nineteenth Century*, London 1848, ii. ch. xi.

Scolari, *Memoria Storica*, Milan 1856.

More recently a very detailed but untrustworthy account was published by Arturo Vecchini, *Note sulla famiglia Cenci in Il Convito* vol. x.-xi., Roma 1898. Vecchini claimed to have found "in un paisello sul Chienti" a bulky MS. which he declared to have been a transcript from an original in the Vatican. A careful search by Prof. Richard Holbrook in 1906 failed to bring this "original" to light.

lotti¹ in 1877 and 1879. This writer found it possible by a long and thorough examination of the documents in the papal archives and notarial offices at Rome to elucidate practically all the historical questions connected with the narrative of the Cenci. The following is a brief summary of the points wherein he corrects or adds to the account used by Shelley.

Francesco Cenci, born in 1549, was an illegitimate son of Cristoforo Cenci and Beatrice Arias, a married woman. After the death of her husband, Cristoforo legitimized Francesco, and finally, on his own death-bed, married Beatrice. The son was left with a heavy informal debt upon his shoulders, for Cristoforo as treasurer-general of the Apostolic Chamber had been guilty of embezzlement, and the Papacy came down upon Francesco repeatedly for portions of this money. His own crimes, moreover, brought in a large sum to the Papal treasury in fines. He first appeared in court at the age of eleven charged with brawling; at fourteen he was in trouble over an illegitimate child; and from that time onward he was continually before the papal courts on charges ranging from brawling and cruelty towards servants up to sodomy and murder. It is estimated that in all, he paid to the Pope 155,000 crowns, which, reckoned as it should be at five times its modern equivalent, gives the sum of \$945,000. Walter Savage Landor was quite justified when he said "after St. Peter, King Pepin, and Countess Matilda, the Roman See was under greater obligations to him [Francesco Cenci] than to any other supporter."²

By his first wife, Ersilia, Cenci had twelve children, of whom five died in infancy. The others were Giacomo, Antonina, Cristoforo, Rocco, Beatrice,³ Bernardo, and Paolo, the last unmentioned in Shelley's drama. These children seem to have possessed some of the family traits. Giacomo, as steward of the household, robbed his father of 13,000 crowns by forgery. Rocco with his friend Mario Querro (Shelley's Orsino), ac-

¹ A. Bertolotti, *Francesco Cenci e la sua famiglia*, Firenze 1877, 2d ed. 1879. His account has been recently reproduced in essentials by F. Marion Crawford, *Century*; January, 1908.

² Landor, *Beatrice Cenci: Five Scenes*. Preface.

³ Beatrice was born February 12, 1577, and was thus twenty-two at the time of her execution.

according to the deposition of Lady Beatrice, one night stole four shirts of Francesco, eleven of his handkerchiefs, a priest's dress, four cushions, a silver basin, some towels, and a piece of tapestry. This deposition tends to overthrow the unsupported legend that Beatrice was in love with Querro, who was in fact forty years old at the time of the murder of Cenci. Rocco was not slain while attending mass, as in Shelley's manuscript narrative, but in a duel which occurred in the street. Cristoforo was murdered by a rival for the favors of the wife of a fisherman. The murder of Cenci, at the castle of Petrella on September 9, 1598 by Marzio de Fiorani and Olimpio Calvetti, took place substantially as Shelley's manuscript narrative gives it, as did also the other events up to the time of the trial. Farinaccio, the chief counsel for the defense, a brilliant but rather unscrupulous lawyer of doubtful personal character, succeeded in saving Bernardo's life on the false plea that he was of weak intellect, and advanced the charge of incest against the dead Cenci, but without other proof than that Beatrice had been kept a prisoner by him. The execution took place, not as in Shelley's manuscript narrative on May 11, but on September 11, 1599. Thirty-five years after Beatrice's death, a secret codicil to her will was found leaving a large sum, with elaborate precautions against discovery, to a "certain poor boy," probably a natural son of her own. And the report of an alleged¹ confession of Beatrice states that she admitted having yielded her honor to Olimpio Calvetti, the warden of Petrella, in order to induce him to murder her father.

Thus in the light of the miscalled "sober" facts of history, the lofty tragedy of the family of the Cenci becomes a pitifully grotesque and vulgar affair. We may well be thankful that Shelley lived before the truth was known, for otherwise we should be the poorer by the loss of a great poem. But the value which has been sometimes claimed for his drama as a true reflection of Italian conditions at the beginning of the sixteenth century plainly does not exist.

¹The authenticity of this confession is controverted, not with entire success, by Prof. Francesco Sabatini, *La Torre dei Cenci e La Leggenda di Beatrice*, Roma, 1906.

This, of course, involves no vital criticism of Shelley. He was writing, not a history, but a tragedy, and even had he known the actual facts in the case, it would have been necessary to idealize them in some such way as his source had done. On the other hand, it should be pointed out that Miss Helene Richter, who in her admirable book upon Shelley contrasts the supposed historical accuracy of "The Cenci" with the inaccuracy of Byron's "Marino Faliero,"¹ directly inverts the actual situation. Not only did Byron in general have far more historical sense than Shelley, but in the special case of "Marino Faliero" he at least made an attempt to obtain a trustworthy account, whereas Shelley accepted at its face value and without investigation, the first manuscript that came to hand.

Furthermore, in his treatment of this source Shelley exercised a large artistic liberty. Piety and formal religion play a great part in the Italian narrative, where Cenci is censured for his atheism, and Beatrice and Lucretia are praised for their devoutness. This is entirely altered by Shelley, who substitutes for the Italian concernment with ecclesiastical forms and ceremonies, a northern intensity of individual religious feeling and a sense of direct relationship with God quite alien to the Roman Catholic conception of things. This alteration changes the whole spirit of the situation, and in place of the Italian sensuousness in both crime and piety it presents an inner spirituality and emotional subjectivity much more Teutonic than Latin. These changes I shall discuss in more detail in my chapter on the characters, where I shall point out how they are all changes for the better, dramatically and artistically. Here I wish merely to insist upon their significance from the historical point of view. From this point of view it is evident that they take away all possibility of regarding the play as a careful study of Italian life in the sixteenth century, or as any contribution to our historical knowledge.

¹ Helene Richter, *Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Weimar 1898, p. 394.

VI

DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

During Shelley's lifetime the English stage was in an interesting condition. Rarely in its entire history has it been endowed with better actors or poorer playwrights than in the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

Covent Garden Theater in 1803 came under the management of John Philip Kemble, the great tragedian upon whose shoulders had fallen the ample robe of Garrick; the theater continued under his direction for fifteen years, during which time it burned down and was then rebuilt on a much larger scale. Associated with John Kemble in the Covent Garden Company there were: his brother Charles Kemble, a graceful and finished actor of romantic roles; his sister Sarah Siddons, the greatest tragic actress the English stage has yet seen; George Frederick Cooke, a tragedian who, when sober, was almost equal to Kemble; "Dolly" Jordan, the best actress of men's parts recorded in stage history; Young, a polished and talented tragic actor; Lewis, Liston, and Mrs. Mattocks, all of high contemporary fame in comedy and farce. When some of these actors began to retire at about the end of the first decade of the century, other actors and actresses came forward to take their places: in 1814 the Miss O'Neil whom Shelley desired for his Beatrice; in 1816, William Charles Macready and Junius Brutus Booth.

Drury Lane, after running down hill under the reckless management of Sheridan, suffered like its rival a loss from fire, and for three years its company found a refuge at the Lyceum; in 1812 the theater was rebuilt, and with the acquisition of Edmund Kean in 1814 it started on a new career of eminence. While with the exception of Kean, its company was not quite so strong as that of the rival house, it possessed in Robert Elliston a tragedian of versatility and accomplishment, in John

Bannister a comedian of celebrity, and in Dowton an unsurpassed actor of low comedy and farce.

Surely here was an array of histrionic talent in both houses that ought to have inspired creative drama of a high order. But actually it did nothing of the kind. Seldom have original productions upon the English stage sunk to a lower ebb than in those twenty-five years during the triumph of the Kembles and Mrs. Siddons and Kean. The writing of tragedy seems to have been a lost art. Although the dramas of Shakespere were continually played to crowded houses,—and curiously enough it was his tragedies rather than his comedies that were most frequently presented,—and although there was an occasional revival of plays by Massinger, Fletcher, and others, yet there was no contemporary tragedy worthy even of the name.

At the end of the century both Kotzebue's "The Spaniards in Peru," and his "Misanthropy and Repentance" had been introduced on the London stage, and had won immediate favor; during the next few years many others of his plays were enacted in England, and were widely read as well. These exerted some influence on the development of another type of play which had been in existence for some time,—the drama of terror, a transplantation to the stage of themes and motives from the romances of the Radcliffian school which had been appearing in great numbers during the preceding decade. Matthew Gregory Lewis was the most successful writer of this species of play; his "Castle Spectre," a piece bristling with unbelievable crimes, hair-breadth escapes, and supernatural interference, had enjoyed a long run in 1797; and in the early years of the new century his "Alfonso King of Castile," "Adelgitha," and "Venoni," continued the popularity of the genre in a more modified and restrained form. In spite of crudity, extravagance, and bare-faced endeavor to create the necessary thrill of horror at whatever cost to probability of plot or consistency of characterization, these plays had the merits of vigor and stage effectiveness, and they were by no means out of harmony with the larger intellectual and literary movement of the time.

But in 1802 a novelty of a different type was introduced by

Holcroft in a translation from the French, called "The Life of Mystery," a "melo-drama" in which elaborate scenery was used and the dialogue was accompanied by descriptive music. This type immediately became so popular that it practically ruled the stage for the next thirty years. The most fertile and ingenious of the English playwrights gave their attention to it, and turned out play after play of this sort with amazing rapidity. Dimond, Hook, Dibdin, Morton, Pocock, and Soane are the names of those who especially caught the art of pleasing the public in this way. The type was a very flexible one, allowing medleys of everything from tragedy to farce, although always accompanied by music. Many of Sir Walter Scott's novels were made over into this kind of drama, Morton's "Lady of the Lake" and Pocock's "Rob Roy" being the most notable of these adaptations; also, medieval themes from other sources appeared, and elements from the drama of terror were frequently incorporated. But from its very nature, the type was entirely without dramatic sincerity, and without literary value. The writing of such pot-pourris did not attract writers of worth. With the single exception of Sheridan Knowles, whose classical tragedies came to the front shortly after Shelley's death, until the time of Bulwer Lytton there was no nineteenth century author of even third rate literary merit who had any continuous connection with the theater.

It is not surprising that the real leaders of English Literature should have turned away in disgust from a stage that seemed to be in the hands of mere theatrical artisans, or that they should have failed to realize the dependence of the drama upon the theater. To them the drama came to mean merely one form of literature, which might or might not gain something from representation on the stage before the multitude. Their air of condescension and their dilettante attitude whenever they undertook to write plays for production showed that they had no conception of the actual nature of the dramatist's art. Had it been otherwise, and had Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats devoted themselves seriously to learning the craftsmanship of the art, we might well have had an English romantic drama at least as successful as the French.

The French school was as temperamentally lyric as the English; the difference was simply that the French writers knew that the drama was not a department of lyric poetry, but that it had laws of its own, which they proceeded to learn, while the English trusted to their poetic inspiration, and never perceived that a knowledge of stage craftsmanship was necessary.

A brief account of the dramatic work of the chief English romanticists is here needful to show where Shelley stood in relation to his fellows. For it is in relation to Milman, Maturin, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Byron, that Shelley as a dramatist is naturally first to be considered, since his work belongs to the same general school of poetic drama as theirs.

Certain main characteristics hold true of the entire school. They were all men of literary attainments and literary training, who had served no apprenticeship to the stage and knew little of technical theatrical requirements; their ideals were literary and not dramatic. They were all directly inspired by the romantic mood: romantic lyricism, emphasis upon expression in words rather than in deeds, emphasis upon emotion rather than volition, characterize their plays. These become tragedies of feeling instead of tragedies of the will. For a struggle between conflicting motives they substitute an alternation between contradictory moods. Dramatic situations are regarded, consciously or unconsciously, as possessing their chief *raison d'être* in the opportunity offered for the writing of emotional lyric poetry, and as a natural result this poetry is often sentimental, and lacks any sufficient basis in outer fact.

With the exception of Milman's "Fazio" and the three classical plays of Byron, all of these works reveal a strong influence from the drama of terror upon their plot, setting, characterization, and the fundamental nature of their emotional appeal. This appeal is made to three chief feelings: romantic love, curiosity, and horror. The works of the group treat of love as the main theme, and set it forth with all the sentiment of which the writers are capable. A simple working out of this theme, however, is not trusted to furnish a

sufficient emotional interest. For this, resort is made to the curiosity aroused by complicated plots, disguised characters, and the unravelling of mysterious secrets, usually of a horrible nature. In harmony with these elements of mystery and horror, the setting is always medieval, and the machinery of the drama of terror,—castle, monastery, secret passages, and dungeons,—is generally retained intact. The emphasis upon horror appears especially in the treatment of the characters. These are usually contrasted along Rousseauesque lines; the hero belongs to the romantic ideal, the brave, chivalrous, introspective, but not subtle “natural man,” at war with society; the counter-action is represented in various ways, but most frequently by individual, highly intellectual monsters of villainy. It is in the portrayal of these villains that the romantic delight in horror reaches its highest pitch; Maturin’s *De Zelos*, and to a certain extent his hero-villain *Bertram*, Wordsworth’s *Oswald*, Coleridge’s *Ordonio* and *Emerick*, and Keats’s *Conrad* all belong to the same type—enormously wicked, capable of any cruelty or crime, subtle, crafty, cunning, intellectual, and absolutely without conscience. The romantic hero is generally a babe in the hands of this grim adversary, whose murderous designs supply the action of the play, and produce the katharsis of horror at the end.

The lesser members of this group, *Milman* and *Maturin*, require only a few words; the others, although no better as dramatists, are of such unquestioned literary importance as to demand a somewhat fuller treatment.

Milman’s “Fazio” was produced in 1815, and was the success of the season. It was written, the author tells us, “with some view to the stage,” but it owed its favorable reception far more to the splendid acting of Miss O’Neil than to any intrinsic merits of its own. The play is, in truth, a most unfortunate combination of romanticism and classicism: its main theme—the corrupting power of wealth and luxury—is a commonplace of romanticism, and its characters are endowed with the romantic fullness of expression and total lack of dignified reserve; but on the other hand, its construction is semi-classical, and dismal scenes of mere dialogue without action make up the bulk of the work.

Very different is Maturin's "Bertram," the success of 1816, an out-and-out production of the school of terror, and romantic to its very core. The chief character, Bertram, was drawn plainly from the model of Byron's Corsair and Lara, to which fact, united with the gorgeous scenery of its first production and the power of Edmund Kean's acting, must be attributed, doubtless, a considerable part of its success. Yet the play is by no means destitute of very genuine dramatic merit; the construction is well managed, every act after the first having its strong stage situation, and the climax in the fourth act involving a thrilling scene of sustained suspense not without power over even a modern reader far removed from sympathy with the pseudo-medievalism of the characters. On the whole, as a stage play "Bertram" seems the most meritorious of any of those produced in the period under discussion. But its merits were apparently accidental, or at least due to mental conditions which Maturin could not repeat. His next play, "Manuel," contained the same "terrible" pseudo-medieval types of character, but entirely lacked the strong situations of "Bertram"; even with Edmund Kean in the chief role it proved a complete failure on the stage.

Wordsworth wrote but one play, "The Borderers." It was the product of three years' labor (1795-7),¹ and when it was finally completed Wordsworth was of exactly the same age as Shelley when "The Cenci" was composed. Written in the first instance with no thought of the stage, as Wordsworth himself tells us,² it was curtailed at the suggestion of a certain Mr. Knight, an actor, and sent to one of the Covent Garden troupe in November, 1797. This latter unknown personage expressed great admiration for the play, so Wordsworth and his sister went to the expense and trouble of a stage-coach journey to London to see if they could get it accepted. Three weeks were spent at the metropolis, but in vain; the play was rejected.³ Long after, when Wordsworth had apparently for-

¹ Christopher Wordsworth, *Memoirs of William Wordsworth*, 1851, i. 96-97, 113.

² *The Borderers*, 1842, preface.

³ Christopher Wordsworth, *Memoirs*, i. 113.

gotten his journey and the three weeks' tedious delay in London, he wrote: "I had no hope, nor even a wish (though a successful play would in the then state of my finances have been a most welcome piece of good fortune) that he [the manager of Covent Garden] should accept my performance."¹

Dramatically speaking, the work has hardly a single merit: it is exaggerated in plot, morbid in characterization, and sentimentally emotional in style. There is some rather plain imitation of Shakespeare: "King Lear" gives the cue for Idonea's curse in the last act; the hero, Marmaduke, betrays many of the characteristics of Hamlet, particularly in the scene where he hesitates at the commission of the murder which he believes justice demands; and the dark and villainous Oswald reminds us strongly both of Shakespeare's Iago and of Schiller's Franz Moor; but in the larger aspects of the plot and setting and in the spirit of the whole, it is to Schiller far more than to Shakespeare that indebtedness is due. Wordsworth undoubtedly intended his piece to be a kind of English "Robbers," and from this point of view, its wild revolt against society, its idealization of the magnanimous outlaw hero, its bare heaths under the open sky of nature, and its free expression of emotion present a most interesting continuation of the Sturm and Drang mood. The revolutionary attitude of Godwinism is here given plain, if incoherent utterance, sixteen years before its immortalization in "Queen Mab." As a flaming outbreak of individualism "The Borderers" is significant, especially so in its surprising contrast to the self-control attained by Wordsworth in the very next year; but as a drama, its significance is slight indeed. Schiller with all his wildness and absurdity of characterization makes his play dramatically effective through vigorous scenes of action. The English follower of Schiller, writing without the stage in mind, introduces even greater absurdities of characterization without the compensating scenes of action; emotional exclamation, either in soliloquy or dialogue is his sole resource.

Coleridge, in the summer and autumn of 1797, completed a romantic play entitled "Osorio," and sent it to Drury Lane.

¹ *The Borderers*, 1842, preface.

It was rejected by Sheridan whose "sole objection," as Coleridge wrote complainingly, "is, the obscurity of the three last acts."¹ To a friend, Sheridan was more confidential, saying that he had received a tragedy from Coleridge which had one extraordinary line: "Drip, Drip." "In short," he added, "it is all dripping."² The play remained in darkness and oblivion for fifteen years, until 1812, when it was accepted by the Drury Lane committee, through the influence of Lord Byron. Numerous alterations were made,³ and it was eventually produced under a new name, "Remorse," on January 23, 1813.⁴ According to all accounts a considerable success seems to have been achieved. Coleridge received £400, and the play ran for twenty nights. When printed, it quickly demanded a second and a third edition. It is known to have been repeated in 1813 and 1814 at Calne by a travelling company, and it was even given occasionally at the metropolis in later years. Coleridge was now fairly launched on the career of a successful dramatist, and he had only himself to blame that he did not pursue it. After the appearance of "Remorse" he allowed two years to pass without making another attempt. Then in 1815 he wrote "Zapolya," and the next spring procured its acceptance at Drury Lane on condition of certain alterations. These Coleridge agreed to make, but, instead of attempting them, he became despondent and did nothing. Maturin's "Bertram" was eventually accepted by Drury Lane in place of "Zapolya," and Coleridge found his only consolation in writing a scathing criticism of the new play when it was produced. Thenceforth he attempted no further creative work in the field of drama. The possible loss to the stage in his case was much greater than in that of Wordsworth, since Coleridge, unlike his brother-poet, had come to know the difference between genuine tragedies and mere morbid tales of villainy. Where Coleridge's chief interest lay, however, is shown by his

¹ Coleridge to Poole, December (?) 1797 (J. Dykes Campbell, *S. T. Coleridge*, 1894, p. 78).

² James Gillman, *Life of Coleridge*, 1838, p. 265.

³ Campbell, p. 189.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

remark that he liked "Remorse," because "certain pet abstract notions of mine are therein expounded."¹

These notions were certainly abstract, and they were certainly fully expounded, but they were not of a nature possibly to form a good drama. Nothing can well be imagined more intrinsically untheatrical than a play whose chief end and aim is to show the subjective development of remorse in the character of its villain; throughout we are continually offended by overt didacticism, and are perpetually defrauded of the action which we demand; whenever we are led to expect that the injured Don Alvar is about to close in a death struggle with his wicked brother, the next moment the good hero decides to obtain his revenge simply by praying for his enemy's soul. It is a testimony to considerable dramatic ability on Coleridge's part that with such a theme he should have been able to make his play as successful as it was. The characters are much more consistent and interesting than Wordsworth's abnormal monsters, but they are still in harmony with the tradition of the drama of terror. Other evidences of the same lineage are the setting of the play in medieval Spain, the prominence of cave, castle, and dungeon, the introduction of the Inquisition, and the emphasis upon superstition and mystery. In spirit "Remorse" is similar to "The Borderers," preaching freedom, rebellion, and the value of ingenuous emotion as contrasted with intellectual cunning. In Coleridge's second play, written eighteen years later, there is much less of the romantic mood, or at least it is the romanticism of Shakespeare instead of that of the School of Terror. Shakesperian influence, indeed, is apparent in individual passages of the earlier play, but in "Zapolya" the whole plot is avowedly based in large measure on the "Winter's Tale," and the characters are in great part derived from that play and from "Cymbeline." In clearness of motivation "Zapolya" marks an advance over "Remorse," but here as elsewhere in Coleridge's later work we find a certain perfunctoriness and half-heartedness which leaves both the characters and the situations incomplete and ineffectual.

¹ Campbell, p. 191.

Keats's single finished play, "Otho the Great," can be considered as only in part representative of his dramatic ideals. It was written in the summer of 1819, by Keats and Charles Brown in collaboration, Brown furnishing the plot, and Keats writing out each scene as it was described to him, without knowing what was to follow. The plot proved to be of the conventional romantic type with medieval setting, complicated love intrigue, and the usual intellectual monsters of villainy; the characters were thoroughly unnatural and the situations hopelessly improbable. When the fifth act was reached, Keats rebelled, and insisted upon finishing the drama in his own way.¹ But it was too late, then, to save it, and the only part of the work that is of value is the style, which, while too florid to be entirely dramatic, possesses Keats's usual richness of color and depth of tone. The play was accepted by Drury Lane with a promise of performance the next year—a promise which was not fulfilled. Immediately after finishing "Otho," Keats began a drama on the subject of King Stephen; only about 170 lines were finished, but in them we feel a martial vigor, and breathe the air of battle as we hardly do in any other play written since the days of Shakespere. Yet dramatically powerful as are the four individual scenes which we have, the drama was evidently to be constructed on the model of the Shakespere chronicle play, than which nothing could be much less adapted to the modern stage. There is little to show that Keats, any more than the other romanticists, realized the vital dependence of the drama upon the stage, or would have been willing to undergo the severe discipline of mastering stage requirements.

Byron possessed more actual acquaintance with the theater and the contemporary drama than did any other of the romanticists. In at least one year, 1813, he had a box at Covent Garden for the entire season,² and during most of his residence in London until 1816 he seems to have attended both theaters not infrequently. For a part of that time he was on the Subcommittee of Management at Drury Lane. In 1814 (Feb-

¹ Keats, *Poems*, 1905, De Selincourt ed., p. 552.

² Moore, *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron*, 1830, i. 446.

ruary 20) he confided to his Journal: "I wish that I had a talent for the drama; I would write a tragedy, *now*."¹ The next year he got so far as to write the first act of a play on the subject later used in "Werner," and the manuscript of this act shows from its stage directions that it was intended for production. After his social ostracism and abandonment of England, however, Byron's pride prevented him from taking any measures which would seem to cater to the public taste. His historical tragedies, "Marino Faliero," "Sardanapalus," "The Two Foscari,"—attempted revivals of the aristocratic French classical drama,—and his romantic play "Werner,"—one of the latest and best modifications of the terror type,—were alike prefaced with ostentatious denials of any stage intention. Nevertheless, Byron's great literary popularity resulted in their all being put upon the stage, sooner or later, with varying theatrical success. "Marino Faliero" was put on by Cooper seven times in 1821; it was revived by Macready in 1842 and damned after two nights; it was again revived, by Phelps, in 1867, for a month and a half; as late as 1887, it was acted in Germany nineteen times by the "Meiningers."² "Sardanapalus" was played twenty-two times by Macready in 1834; it was revived by Charles Kean in the summer of 1853; in 1877 it was made over into a grand spectacular play and performed at Manchester and Liverpool, the same adaptation being afterwards presented at Booth's Theater, New York; a French tragedy in 1834, and a French opera in 1867 were also produced upon the basis of Byron's drama.³ "The Two Foscari" was performed by Macready in 1825, and again in 1838.⁴ "Werner" was first produced in England by Macready in 1830, although it had previously been given in 1826 by Barry at the Park Theater, New York; thenceforth, it was one of the most successful plays in Macready's repertoire until his retirement in 1851. Since Macready, no one, so far as is known, has attempted it.⁵

¹ Moore, i. 501.

² Byron, *Works*, 1901, iv. 324.

³ *Ibid.*, v. 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, v. 114.

⁵ *Ibid.*, v. 324.

These repeated performances certainly suggest that Byron's plays must have in them the stuff of which the genuine acted drama is made; in spite of himself he attained in "Werner" a theatrical success that none of the other English poets of the century was able to equal. In contrast to the rest of the romanticists Byron possessed the volitional power necessary for the creation of great drama, and his plays do reveal some struggles of the will although these are almost lost sight of in the fullness of emotional expression. It is unfortunate that he should have attempted, under the influence of Alfieri, to revive the style of the classical drama, a type whose loftiness and ideal serenity were quite opposed to the restless fervor of his own nature. The vigor of romantic action was sacrificed in "Marino Faliero," "Sardanapalus," and "The Two Foscari," without gaining any compensating harmonies of structure or characterization. Yet on the other hand, after the insincerity and extravagance of the other romanticists, one cannot but be pleased with the veracity and self-control of Byron's work. His substitution of the appeal to admiration of the heroic in place of the appeal to horror, of a genuine, if idealized, historical setting in place of a mythical medievalism, and of large themes of imperial dignity in place of the conventional theme of love, all seem healthy and invigorating. In "Werner" Byron returned to the romantic play shorn of its worst artificiality, and produced an exceedingly interesting drama of curiosity. In spite of uneven and inconsistent characterization, "Werner" is by far the most actable of his plays, although inferior to all of the others in literary merit. Had Byron devoted himself seriously to writing for the stage, one feels that he ought to have produced dramas of great permanent value, but he cherished, or at least affected to cherish, the notion that his plays would be sufficient unto themselves without the aid of representation. Their long speeches, irrelevant scenes, and leisurely developed plots mark them as ultimately closet dramas, and the result is that they are now fast dropping out of the knowledge of mankind. In this instance, as in all the others, we find high talents rendered non-effective dramatically, through simple ignorance of the stage and misconception of the nature of dramatic art.

How far was Shelley's case different from that of these contemporaries with whom he was in such close touch in his general achievement? Did he in any degree share their prejudices against the stage? Did his experience qualify him better for the work of a successful playwright?

According to the concurrent testimony of Medwin, Hogg, Peacock, and Mrs. Shelley, the actual acquaintance of Shelley with the contemporary acted drama must have been very slight. Medwin tells a story of a truant adventure of boyhood when he and Shelley ran away from school at Brentford to see Mrs. Jordan in "The Country Girl"; but he explicitly adds: "[Shelley] had no fondness for theatrical representations; and in London, afterwards, rarely went to the play."¹ Of the Oxford period of Shelley's career Hogg says, "far from feeling a desire to visit the theaters, Shelley would have esteemed it a cruel infliction to have been compelled to witness performances that [even] less fastidious critics have deemed intolerable."²

In October 1814, Mrs. Shelley's Diary mentions attendance at a play which Shelley left after the second act. She goes on to record, apparently uttering his views as well as her own, "the extreme depravity and disgusting nature of the scene; the inefficacy of acting to encourage or maintain the delusion.—The loathsome sight of men personating characters which do not and cannot belong to them." The production which aroused all this disgust was Edmund Kean's "Hamlet."³ Peacock later attempted to take Shelley's education in hand on this matter, but in vain. He gives a humorous account of his luring Shelley to a performance of Sheridan's "School for Scandal," and of the indignant poet's attempt to leave in the middle of the play, insisting that it was written only to maintain the superiority of profligacy and ignorance over thrift and learning. But Peacock did succeed in initiating his recalcitrant friend into the relatively simple mysteries of Italian opera, at

¹ Medwin, *Life*, i. 52.

² Hogg, *Shelley at Oxford*, New Monthly Magazine, October 1832.

³ Dowden, *Life*, i. 475.

which, particularly the operas of Mozart, Shelley was a frequent attendant during the seasons of 1817 and 1818.¹

In the latter year he also saw Miss O'Neil in the part of Bianca in Milman's "Fazio," and was greatly impressed by her acting.² Mrs. Shelley mentions his having seen Miss O'Neil several times,³ and the Diary records attendance at the "Merchant of Venice" (probably Kean) February 11, 1817, "Bride of Abydos," February 21, 1818, "Castle of Glyndower," March 1, 1818, and an unnamed performance at Lyons, March 23, 1818.⁴ Shelley certainly must have seen enough of Kean's acting to modify his first dissatisfaction, since in a letter to Peacock at the time of "The Cenci" he mentions him in favorable terms.⁵ By that time, he had also sufficiently recovered from his ideas as to the inferiority of the stage to be willing to write for it.

In this desire to adapt his play to stage requirements, Shelley certainly shows a truer dramatic sense than Wordsworth or Byron, with their real or affected indifference to the presentation of their plays. On the other hand, he evidently had no natural love for the theater, and no great knowledge of the stage or the actor's art,—a knowledge which comes, not with ten or a dozen evenings at the theater, but only with the closest intercourse of years. In these respects, Shelley's equipment was considerably less than Byron's, and perhaps even less than that of the other closet dramatists.

Hence, in the composition of "The Cenci," Shelley was naturally governed, not so much by the requirements of the actual stage for which he was writing, but of which he knew so little, as by the examples of the great Greek and Elizabethan dramas with which he was familiar. The degree of success attained by him is an illustration of the large amount of dramatic

¹ Peacock, *Memoirs of P. B. Shelley*, Fraser's Magazine, June 1858.

² *Ibid.*

³ Shelley's *Works*, 1839 ed., vol. ii. p. 276.

⁴ Dowden, *Life*, ii. 103, 184, 189. Genest fails to record the performance of the Merchant of Venice on the above date. He gives the date of the first and only performance of the Castle of Glyndower as March 2, not March 1 (*Eng. Stage*, 8: 642).

⁵ Shelley to Peacock, July 1819 (Shelley's *Works*, Forman ed., viii. 113).

knowledge that may be gained from a literary acquaintance with the work of master dramatists, but at the same time it reveals the insufficiency of such an acquaintance. From his reading Shelley learned what should be the fundamental qualities of a good literary drama, but he did not learn what should be the fundamental qualities of a good stage play. Both of these facts will become evident through an analysis of the drama, dealing first with the details of structure, and then considering the ultimate dramatic appeal of the play.

Shelley made numerous changes in plot from the account given in his source. Propriety dictated several at the outset. Thus the crime for which Cenci is mulcted at the beginning of the play was changed from sodomy to murder, the description of Cenci's relations with courtesans was omitted, and his attempt to persuade Beatrice to the incest was entirely ignored. In the source, Beatrice and Lucretia themselves draw out the nails which have been driven into Cenci's head, and themselves throw the body into the garden; in the drama, the method of the murder was changed to strangling, and the office of disposing of the body was put into the hands of the murderers, Marzio and Olimpio.

Other alterations were governed by Shelley's sense of tragic irony. In the source, Rocco is indeed slain while at the mass, but by a private enemy; Shelley attributes his death to the falling of the church itself. In the source, we are merely told that Cristofero was assassinated by a surgeon; in the drama, his representative with altered spelling, Cristofano,

"Was stabbed in error by a jealous man,
Whilst she he loved was sleeping with his rival." I. iii. 62-63.

More noticeable still is Shelley's introduction in the fourth act of an order from the Pope for Cenci's execution, which comes just too late to prevent his murder. Here the desire for dramatic irony led Shelley to make use of an unmotivated act at variance with the whole conduct of the Pope throughout the rest of the play.

The remaining changes consist in bringing closely together events that in the original narrative are widely separated as to time. The most important alteration of this kind appears in

the events that follow upon the death of Cenci. In the source, the fact of murder is not suspected for some time, and Beatrice and Lucretia return to Rome with successfully feigned mourning. It is only later, after a Petrella laundress has made a deposition concerning blood-stained sheets, that a commission sent to the castle examines Cenci's body, with the result that his wife and children are then taken into custody. Meanwhile, one of the murderers, Olimpio, has been secretly killed by order of Guerra (Orsino); but the other, Marzio, is now captured by the authorities, and confesses his crime, only to retract his confession on being confronted with Beatrice. Next ensue several months of quiet, while the Cenci are held in confinement awaiting further evidence. At the end of that time one of the hired assassins of Olimpio is captured, and indicates Guerra (Orsino) as his employer. The latter escapes from Rome in disguise, but thereby throws renewed suspicion upon the family of the Cenci, who are now put to the torture, and, with the exception of Beatrice, confess the murder. Bernardo, who was really not involved in the crime, is pardoned; but, in spite of the appeals of advocates and nobles, Beatrice, Lucretia and Giacomo are condemned and executed. Thus, in the source there are two long intermissions of time, one immediately after the murder, the other after Marzio's recantation.

Both of these interruptions to the narrative were skillfully avoided by Shelley, who, in the first instance, probably with "Macbeth" in mind, placed the discovery of the murder immediately after its commission, and in the second did not permit the recantation of Marzio to give the prisoners more than a few hours' respite.

Thus, through these changes, Shelley was enabled to condense the events of more than a year into a very few days. As to the more minute indications of these days, he seems to have been somewhat indifferent, and his references are not altogether consistent. The first two acts clearly enough occur on successive days. At the end of the first scene of the first act the messenger from Salamanca arrives with the news of the death of Cenci's sons which gives the occasion for the banquet. In the same scene Cenci gives the order for Beatrice to attend

him at midnight. Before this midnight meeting there intervene the two scenes of Beatrice's conversation with Orsino and the quarrel at the banquet. That the first scene of the second act occurs on the following day is made plain by Cenci's statement:

Why, yesternight you dared to look
With disobedient insolence upon me, II. i. 106-7.

But at this point we meet with a difficulty. Further on in the same scene Cenci says:

On Wednesday next I shall set out: you know
That savage rock, the castle of Petrella: II. i. 167-68.

The phraseology seems to imply that Wednesday is at least several days off, and not the next day. At the end of the same scene Cenci soliloquizes in a way that shows he is about to execute his incestuous design, and the first scene of the next act introduces Beatrice immediately after the violation has occurred, seemingly that same day. Yet in this scene Lucretia says:

Tomorrow before dawn,
Cenci will take us to that lonely rock,
Petrella, in the Apulian Apennines. III. i. 238-40.

This seems inconsistent with Cenci's statement earlier on the same day that they would set out on "Wednesday next." Furthermore in an intervening scene Camillo speaks of "that impious feast the other night" (II. ii. 29), whereas the first scenes of the second and third acts both take place the very next day after the feast. It is clear that Shelley never took the trouble to determine in his own mind just when the banquet and the outrage had actually taken place. From this point, however, the scenes proceed onward without difficulty, the meeting of Orsino and Giacomo occurring at two o'clock on the morning of Thursday (III. ii. 24), the murder of Cenci at midnight on Thursday (III. ii. 74-5; IV. ii. 1), and the capture of Giacomo and escape of Orsino sometime on Friday (V. i. 72). There is a brief indefinite intermission after this before the trial, which with the ensuing torture of Beatrice occupies one day (V. ii. 192). The next day (V. iii. 4) brings

the torture of Lucretia and Giacomo and their confession. After another short indefinite intermission the final sentence is given.

The inconsistencies that appear in regard to the details of time, while characteristic of Shelley, do not really obscure the course of the drama, and it should be remembered that even Shakespere sometimes nods in like manner.¹ The more important fact to be noted is that Shelley, although he did not observe unity of time in the strict sense, or with any such fidelity as Byron chose to exercise in his classical plays, nevertheless did compress the events of his plot into about as brief a compass as could be done with plausibility.

In regard to the placing of his scenes, it is quite otherwise. Here the influence of Shakespere was perilously paramount with Shelley as with the other romanticists, all of whom tended to pile up scene upon scene without sufficiently realizing that the introduction of the front curtain and set pieces of scenery had interfered with the uninterrupted shifting of scenes possible on the open Shakesperian stage. To be sure Coleridge in his "Zapolya" restricted himself to six scenes (excluding the Prologue), and Byron in "Sardanapalus" and "The Two Foscari" limited himself to six and five, but in "Remorse" Coleridge employed ten, and in "Marino Faliero" and in "Werner" Byron used twelve and nine respectively. Maturin's "Bertram" and "Manuel" have fourteen and fifteen scenes, and Wordsworth's "Borderers" has seventeen. Shelley in "The Cenci" stands well up among the leaders with fifteen, but it should be added in his defense that none of his changes of scene are quite so insignificant and needless as some of those in the plays of the other writers mentioned. It is plain, however, that he had little conception of the value of restriction in this matter, since several of the scenes could have been easily combined, particularly the first and second scenes of the first act and the second, third, and fourth scenes of the fourth act.

¹ Compare the time sequence of *Othello*, the statements as to the age of the hero in *Hamlet*, and the duration of the sleeping potion in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Similarly to Shakesperian influence, perpetuated on the acting stage of the day, must be ascribed the profuse employment of that dangerous device, the soliloquy. All of the romanticists were especially fond of the alluring capacity of the soliloquy to express subjective feeling. Wordsworth and Shelley, following Shakespere's example in "Othello," repeatedly use it to divulge to the audience the hidden plots and dark emotions of their favorite villains. In "The Borderers" there are nine soliloquies, of which five, and those the longest, come from the mouth of the mysterious and treacherous Oswald. In "The Cenci" there are twelve, of which six belong to Cenci, and four to Orsino. The other romanticists use the device with about equal frequency. Most of the soliloquies of Byron and Shelley are somewhat longer than those of Wordsworth and Coleridge, but all are sufficiently long to be displeasing to our modern feeling accustomed to more artistic means of exposition through dialogue as developed by Ibsen and his followers. It should always be borne in mind, however, that the soliloquy in these romantic dramas of the early nineteenth century is neither of greater length nor more frequent employment than in the tragedies of Shakespere,¹ and that there is no such technical modern stage objection to it as arises in the case of an overplus of scenes. We do not like the soliloquy, to-day, but the Elizabethan and the Romantic poets did like it, and we are hardly justified in considering its use as in itself an artistic defect. Of course, if the soliloquy be regarded as an actual talking to one's self aloud, it is absurd enough. In real life only children do that. Shelley was apparently aware of this often urged objection, for he seems to attempt a refutation of it in Cenci's soliloquy:

I think they cannot hear me at that door.
What if they should? And yet I need not speak,
Though the heart triumphs with itself in words. I. i. 138-40.

This shows, however, that Shelley himself regarded the soliloquy as a form of actual speech instead of as a merely symbolic means of making known to us unspoken and con-

¹ There are in *Macbeth* seven soliloquies, in *Lear* nine, in *Hamlet* and *Othello* ten each.

cealed feelings that could not otherwise be made manifest. Here he was assuredly on the wrong track. Not because it is natural for the over-full heart to "triumph with itself in words" is the soliloquy of service, but because there is no other possible way of expressing such secret emotions and ideas as the speaker would not be willing to communicate to any other character in the play. Herein, and herein alone, lies its real justification. Whatever expository purpose may be served must be incidental, if we are not to be hopelessly repelled. To utilize the soliloquy merely for the purpose of giving knowledge of certain facts to the audience is simply a crass kind of exposition due to dramatic indolence or incapacity. Shelley, with all his fondness for the device, never quite demeans it to this lower level, for he utilizes its expository function only in connection with the self-counsel and passionate planning natural to such characters as Cenci and Orsino.

In determining the nature of the stage effects which Shelley desired, the influence of Elizabethan drama was again dominant and this time more propitiously. The likeness of some of the situations in "The Cenci" to Shakesperian originals has long been perceived, and it is here hardly necessary to do more than mention them. The most striking series of parallels occurs in the murder scene, which was undoubtedly written with "Macbeth" in mind, though perhaps unconsciously.¹ Even here, however, to speak of Shelley's treatment as a plagiarism, as some writers have done, seems to me hardly justifiable. The interrupted banquet scene in "Macbeth" may also have given Shelley the first suggestion for his own banquet scene in the first act, which, however, he works out in a typically romantic manner in the contrast between the blood-curdling speeches of the father over his sons' deaths and the eloquent rhetorical entreaty of the suffering and innocent daughter. From "Lear" Shelley clearly obtained the idea of Cenci's terrible curse upon his daughter,² and from "Othello" the kernel of Giacomo's long comparison of the dying lamp to

¹ Cf. *Macbeth* II. ii. 10-20, and *The Cenci* IV. iii. 5-22.

² Cf. *Lear* I. iv. 297-311, and *The Cenci* IV. i. 114-157.

his father's life.¹ There are numerous other parallelisms to Shakespere,² but these are the most important.

From Middleton's "Changeling" I think that Shelley may have derived Orsino's plan to obtain control over Beatrice through her murder of Cenci, a plan which bears close similarity to the blackmailing methods of De Flores in Middleton's play. The trial scene of "The Cenci" resembles the trial of Vittoria Corrombona in Webster's "White Devil" in that in each case a woman who is guilty of the crime charged against her nevertheless holds the sympathy of the audience through her own sheer courage and the unfair methods of her accusers.

The two prison scenes of "The Cenci" were probably influenced by two similar scenes in Milman's contemporary drama, "Fazio," one of the plays which Shelley saw acted in 1818. In the first of these scenes, Fazio, who is condemned to death, is visited in prison by his wife, Bianca, and the two indulge in pathetic reminiscences comparable in spirit to the prison dialogue of Bernardo and Beatrice; Bianca then leaves her husband in order to make one last attempt to obtain a pardon for him in the same manner as, with Shelley, Bernardo makes a last appeal on behalf of his family to the Pope; in the next scene, Fazio is again visited by Bianca before his execution, but an officer enters to drag her away, just as, with Shelley, the judge commands Bernardo to be separated from Beatrice. It is interesting to note, however, that in Milman's play the officer sentimentally yields to Bianca's entreaty, and allows her to remain, while in "The Cenci" Bernardo's appeal, "Oh, would ye divide body from soul?" only calls forth in reply the horrifying jest: "That is the headman's business."

More important than the sources of influence upon particular scenes in "The Cenci" is the question of its dramatic struc-

¹ Cf. *Othello* V. ii. 7-13, and *The Cenci* III. ii. 11-18, 51-53.

² Cf. *Hamlet* I. iii. 78-80, and *Cenci* IV. iv. 40-41; *King John* IV. ii. 220-41 and *Cenci* V. i. 19-24; *Lear* I. i. 124 and *Cenci* IV. i. 173-4; *Lear* I. v. 50 and *Cenci* V. iv. 56-57; *Lear* II. iv. 283-5 and *Cenci* III. i. 86-89; *Measure for Measure* III. i. 118-32 and *Cenci* V. iv. 47-75; *Merchant of Venice* IV. i. 71-80 and *Cenci* V. iv. 101-109; *Othello* V. ii. 303-4 and *Cenci* V. iii. 88-89; *Richard III.* IV. iv. 168-71 and *Cenci* I. iii. 173-175; *Twelfth Night* II. iv. 43-9 and *Cenci* V. iii. 123-7.

ture as a whole. Here Shakespere in "Othello" furnished the indirect model of a double character play in which the hero is relatively passive at the outset and is gradually roused to tragic action by the attacks of the villain; in "Macbeth," on the other hand, there existed the model of the type in which the hero is active at the outset, and spends his later force in trying to overcome the numerous enemies aroused by his own act. The early part of "The Cenci" conforms to the type of "Othello," the heroes in both cases remaining passive while the action is developed through the machinations of the villains; the latter part conforms to the type of "Macbeth," the hero in each case coming to the front in the murder scene, and thenceforward struggling against the increasing reaction of society.

At this point in our discussion we take leave of the likeness between "The Cenci" and the Elizabethan drama. The determining characteristic of the latter is Action, the determining characteristic of "The Cenci" is Speech. Shelley is so much more interested in what his characters feel and say than in what they do, that each situation in his play tends to be self-sufficient, existing for the sake of the emotions and the poetry which it in itself suggests, instead of as a rightly subordinated part of the total plot.

The individual speeches in "The Cenci" are much longer than those in the closet dramas of the contemporary romantics, not to mention the Elizabethans. Byron's characters are sufficiently copious in utterance, but they yield to Shelley's. The speeches in Coleridge's "Remorse" and "Zapolya" are somewhat shorter than those in "The Cenci," and the speeches in Wordsworth "Borderers" and Keats's "Otho the Great" are shorter still. Thus from this point of view, and it is an important one, "The Cenci," instead of being the best adapted to the modern stage of any of these romantic plays, is really the least so. When we compare it in this respect with Elizabethan plays, the difference is still more striking. In place of the terse and flashing dialogue of Shakespere and his contemporaries, we have in "The Cenci" frequent passages of decla-

mation similar to those in classic tragedy.¹ This tendency toward long individual speeches was probably chiefly due to the influence of those plays which on the whole formed Shelley's most constant literary study throughout mature life—the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The plays of Calderon, which he was beginning to study at the time of the composition of “The Cenci,” may well have exercised a subordinate influence in the same direction.

The structure of Shelley's scenes, also, exclusive of the special instances of the banquet, murder, and trial, is more Greek than Elizabethan. His usual scene consists either of a dialogue between two persons, or of a succession of such dialogues with changed speakers. It is rare for more than two people to be upon the stage at once. Thus act I. scene i. is a dialogue between Cenci and Camillo; act I. scene ii., between Beatrice and Orsino; act II. scene i., first between Lucretia and Beatrice, then between Lucretia and Cenci; act II. scene ii., between Camillo and Giacomo, then Giacomo and Orsino; act III. scene i., first third between Lucretia and Beatrice, last third between Orsino and Giacomo; act IV. scene i., between Lucretia and Cenci; act V. scene i., between Giacomo and Orsino; act V. scene iii., first half between Bernardo and Beatrice; act V. scene iv., first half between Camillo and Bernardo. Such scenes of dialogue between two persons are, of course, frequent in the Greek drama, although there, even omitting the possibility of unnamed attendants, the constant presence of the chorus in the foreground would have given these scenes a very different effect from that of the unpicturesque and monotonous usage in “The Cenci.”

¹ A comparison of the length of all the speeches (exclusive of the choruses) in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, Sophocles's *Antigone*, Euripides's *Alcestis*, Seneca's *Hippolytus*, Corneille's *Cid*, Racine's *Phèdre*, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (selected because its speeches are unusually long for Shakespeare) yields the fact that of all these dramas only Seneca's and Racine's contain on the average as long speeches as Shelley's. The average length of the speeches in Euripides and Shakespeare is about three lines; in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Corneille four lines; in Shelley five lines. The number of speeches extending over ten lines in proportion to the total number are: in Shakespeare 5 per cent., in Euripides 6 per cent., in Sophocles 8 per cent., in Corneille 11 per cent., in Aeschylus 13 per cent., in Shelley 16 per cent., in Racine 17 per cent., in Seneca 19 per cent.

Some of the reviewers in 1886 spoke of Shelley's drama as episodic in character, but this is not correct. There is no subplot of importance, and all the scenes bear upon the central situation. Yet it undoubtedly produces an effect somewhat similar to the slow movement of an episodic drama, because Shelley uses his scenes primarily to express the emotions of the characters instead of to advance the dramatic action. An analysis of the early part of the play in this regard will make the point clearer.

The first act is mainly taken up with setting forth the personality of the chief figures, and, considering that it is an introductory act, this is needed and is well managed. The first scene shows us Cenci in his cruel power, the second shows us Beatrice in her helpless purity, the third brings the protagonists together, and makes plain the unflinching character of each. After the banquet scene no one could doubt that there was to be a struggle to the death between the father and the daughter.

The only criticism to be passed upon the first act from the structural point of view is that the purposes of the characters are shown to us all too fully. This is an important criticism, however, especially in one particular respect. In the very first scene Cenci's criminal determination is revealed as already fully matured. Shelley thus cuts himself off at the outset from the possibility of showing any great development in the character of Cenci or in the main situation. Instead of making the first part of the play lead up to Cenci's purpose as the final result of his exasperated and accumulating hate, Shelley allows all the early scenes to circle fatuously about the subject of the unaccomplished but already planned act of incest.

In the second act the nature of this subject causes insurmountable difficulty in the matter of structure. The Elizabethans, sure of the frank sympathy of their audience, were able to trace the development of incestuous deeds with an openness impossible for Shelley, whose desire not to emphasize the repulsive details of his plot leads to an obscurity which really emphasizes them all the more. After the last speech of Cenci

in the first scene,¹ we expect the incest to occur between the first and second acts, and it is some time after Beatrice's appearance in the second act before we learn that the hideous deed has not already been accomplished. Our uncertainty tends to make the idea of the incest all the more prominent. The end of this scene leaves the relation between Beatrice and her father essentially what it was at the beginning, so that the entire scene might have been omitted without the slightest detriment to the action of the drama.

So, too, the second scene of this act adds nothing essential. It introduces and unfolds the character of the tiresome Giacomo, and it shows the thought of the murder in its first occurrence both to him and to Orsino, but these things could have been done equally well and in much shorter space later on. Like the first scene of this act the second also could be omitted without injury to the play as a whole.

The third act is, in its first scene, of far greater merit. Of course the momentary madness of Beatrice owes its inception to the general tradition of the Elizabethan and late eighteenth century drama in both of which characters very frequently become mad under the stress of tragic suffering; but, on the whole, with the exception of one or two over-subtle passages,² it is thoroughly convincing, and would seemingly make a powerful theatrical appeal. Toward the end of the same scene, however, thirty-six lines are sacrificed to the thoroughly unconvincing and dramatically needless tale of Cenci's malicious endeavor to break up the domestic happiness of Giacomo and his family. Had not Giacomo already been introduced earlier,

¹ I. i. 146-47.

Bid Beatrice attend me in her chamber
This evening: no, at midnight and alone.

² III. i. 19-23:

I cannot pluck it from me, for it glues
My fingers and my limbs to one another,
And eats into my sinews, and dissolves
My flesh to a pollution, poisoning
The subtle, pure, and inmost spirit of life!

III. i. 36-8.

Like Parricide . . .
Misery has killed its father: yet its father
Never like mine—O, God! What thing am I?

this story would be of service to explain his hatred towards his father, but after the second scene of the second act has just been devoted to this very purpose, further enforcement of the motivation in so minor a character is superfluous.

In the second scene of the third act the characterizing motive is reintroduced, this time to depict Giacomo's vacillating remorse over the supposed assassination of his father on the road to Petrella. It contains a number of fine passages, and in the reading is effective, but would not be likely to be so on the stage.

The analysis has been sufficient to show where Shelley's chief interest lay. Like the other romanticists he tended to construct situations to exploit the emotions of his characters, instead of developing situation and characters hand in hand. The same lack of interest in pure narrative and inability to handle elements of plot which appear in all of Shelley's other long works appear also, though less openly, in "The Cenci."

From all these facts it should be sufficiently clear what answer must be given to the question, how far is "The Cenci" an acting drama? As a whole it is not an acting drama at all. A play, one of whose acts fails to advance the plot in the least, ten of whose scenes are purely conversational and without action, and four-fifths of whose speeches are of impossible length, is surely not to be called an acting drama. In all these respects "The Cenci" is less adapted to the modern stage than were Coleridge's "Remorse" and "Zapolya" or Byron's "Sardanapalus" and "Werner" among its literary rivals.

Yet I think no one who loves the theater can accept a negative answer as to the ultimate stage fitness of "The Cenci" without regret. The histrionic opportunities in parts of the play are remarkable. In the banquet scene, the scene after the violation, the scenes of the murder and its discovery, and in parts of the prison scenes, opportunities are afforded for acting of the very highest order. The production of the play in 1886 proved this, if nothing else, for it caused Miss Alma Murray to spring at once from comparative obscurity to the front rank of English actresses. Nothing but the almost complete lack of histrionic opportunity in the rest of the play could justify the loss to the stage of the great possibilities in these scenes.

But admitting that "The Cenci," as a whole, is not in any sense an actable play, does aught remain to be said in its behalf from the dramatic point of view? Yes, a great deal. Not only does the fact that Shelley was unable to adapt the first play which he wrote to stage conditions with which he was unfamiliar fail to prove that he was altogether lacking in fundamental dramatic power; it does not even prove that this particular play was altogether lacking in that power. The acted drama is so complex an art that many other elements are required besides the fundamentally dramatic element. The characteristics which we have been thus far discussing, a clearly developed plot, a consistency of structure, and a brevity of speech, are required in a modern stage drama, but they are not the essentially dramatic requisites. The two requirements which finally determine that a play is ultimately dramatic and which best differentiate the drama from other forms of literature are, that it present a struggle of the human will, and that it show forth in action the supreme moments of this struggle.

A struggle of the human will "The Cenci" certainly has, a struggle more direct and more powerful than is to be found in any of its literary rivals of the century. From the opening of the first act to the conclusion of the last, the conflict of Beatrice is waged, at the beginning against the consummation of her father's horrible designs, at the end against the legacy of judicial vengeance resulting from his murder. It is a conflict in which the combatants on each side are well matched, and in which the results at stake are of tragic importance. In it the force of the protagonists is shattered; and they drag down the lesser characters with them in their ruin.

Furthermore, although Shelley is unable to portray the development of this situation consecutively, he does emphasize in a true dramatic manner the supreme moments of the struggle. There are five of these supreme moments: the violation, the murder, the discovery, the trial, and the condemnation. The first, Shelley comes as near as possible to representing, since he brings Beatrice on the stage immediately after the violation, so that we see the result of Cenci's act upon her will, first stunning her, then rousing her to the determination to take justice

and expiation into her own hands. This is the essential element of the climax, and the one in which we are interested; not the violation itself, which was a mere act of physical force, but its effect upon the will and the character of Beatrice, is of importance. Out of a very delicate situation Shelley constructed a scene unobjectionable on the score of propriety, and effective as a dramatic climax. All the other turning points in the plot are actually shown to us upon the stage, save the murder of Cenci, which is committed just behind it, and obtains full dramatic value through the coming and going of the murderers before our eyes.

Shelley was also successful in still a third important and more technical duty of the dramatist: exposition of the events preceding the opening of the play. Not a few dramas have been wrecked at the very outset upon this sheer obstacle of inanimate facts that in some way must be communicated through a dialogue full of life and imagination. In "The Cenci" the information which it is necessary for us to receive is unfolded in the course of plausible conversation or impassioned soliloquy. Thus, in the first scene, the dialogue between Cenci and Camillo makes plain the relation existing between the Count and the Papacy; the reproaches of Camillo bring out the fact of Cenci's tyranny over his own family; after Camillo's departure Cenci's angry self-communing upon his waning fortune reveals that he has sent his sons to Salamanca, "meaning if possible to starve them there." The conversation of Beatrice and Orsino, in the second scene, makes clear Orsino's position as the formerly accepted lover who, although he has broken off this relationship for the sake of preferment in the Church, still poses as an honorable friend; his soliloquy makes evident, a little too baldly perhaps, his actual dishonorable intentions. In the third scene, the death of Cenci's sons is revealed in his dramatic speech at the banquet, and the helplessness of Beatrice's position is brought out when the guests refuse to rescue her from her father's power. We have the situation now clearly before us, and are ready for its development. The excellence of this exposition consists, first, in the fact that the information is not obtruded upon us in a forced

or unnatural manner, but occurs as it would naturally arise in the speech or thought of the characters, and secondly, that it is not given as mere information but is wrapped round with its emotional significance.

Thus, curiously enough, while "The Cenci" is lacking in all the secondary elements of a good play, it still possesses some of the more primary elements. A drama may succeed without being ultimately dramatic in character, a drama may fail and yet be ultimately dramatic. "The Cenci" belongs to the latter type. Shelley simply did not know enough about the stage to write a successful stage drama; he was not sufficiently a master of theatrical tools. He was also unfortunate in choosing a theme which, while, as he believed it to be, essentially dramatic, was nevertheless one which it would have taxed the genius of the most skillful playwright to present with entire success. Under the circumstances it is no wonder that Shelley was so far from overcoming all the difficulties in his way.

The wonder rather is that, when all deductions are made, the play should still possess so great a fundamental dramatic power. Shelley proved himself able in this instance to seize upon a definite tragic situation, make it visible and vivid before our eyes, reiterate it, emphasize it, burn it into our consciousness, and fix it there permanently and ineffaceably. A great literary drama "The Cenci" remains after all, and one that will not be forgotten. Inadequate of structure as it is, and hampered by its subject-matter, with scenes of declamation where scenes of action are needed, and scenes of action without proper relation to those which precede or follow, now too lingering in its movement, now too hasty, now belonging to one type of play, now to another, too voluble for the stage, too realistic for the closet,—when all these faults have been realized and inscribed in our thought, there still remains on the other side the clear consciousness of a great dramatic struggle, shown to us in its essential human significance, an exhibition of the basest and loftiest characteristics of mankind.

VII

CHARACTERIZATION

The treatment of the characters in Shelley's drama was governed by his fundamental ethical conception of the situation.¹ At the end of his dedication of the play to Leigh Hunt there occurs this significant sentence: "In that patient and irreconcilable enmity with domestic and political tyranny and imposture which the tenor of your life has illustrated, and which, had I health and talents, should illustrate mine, let us, comforting each other in our task, live and die." This shows clearly that in the realism of "The Cenci" Shelley had not at all forgotten his ethical interests and revolutionary sympathies. Although he supposed that he had laid these aside in the composition of the play, he had not really done so. On the contrary, the main theme was primarily congenial to him just because it presented in new circumstances a vivid concrete picture of the very conditions under which he normally envisaged life: i. e., domestic, political, and religious tyranny physically all powerful, but spiritually conquered by their innocent victims. The fact that the victim in this instance was a woman, and that she stood alone against the world made an added appeal to his ever-active chivalry.

Sympathy with the oppressed was probably a more constant factor in Shelley's temperament than in that of any other English poet. It affected his work from the beginning, and created fixed forms for his imagined characters. From his first crude "Irishman's Song" at the age of seventeen, when he exhorted the defeated to rally and strike down the triumphant oppressor, through the revolutionary poems of "Queen Mab" and "The Revolt of Islam," to the dramas of "Prometheus Unbound" and "The Cenci," the same conception of

¹ The same thesis is developed, in a different manner, in Dr. Wagner's monograph, "Shelley's *The Cenci*," Rostock 1903.

life is dominant. This conception views the world as divided into three great classes of men: the tyrants, composed mainly of kings and priests, oppressors of the rest of mankind; the heroes, individual men and women arising from time to time as saviours of mankind; and the slaves, the vast characterless mass who are oppressed by the tyrants or saved by the heroes. The idea that one man in his different relationships might belong at the same time to more than one of these three classes seems never to have occurred to Shelley.

The enduring elements in his conception of the tyrant's character were set forth by Shelley as early as 1811 when in "War," the first of the "Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson," he wrote:

Ambition, Power, and Avarice now have hurled
Death, Fate, and Ruin on a bleeding world.

I-2.

These three, Ambition, Power, and Avarice, and a fourth, Pure Malice, are the most important characteristics of the kings in "Queen Mab" and "The Revolt of Islam"; the despotic husband in "Rosalind and Helen" is characterized by Avarice and Fear; Jupiter in "Prometheus Unbound," by Ambition, Power and Fear; Count Cenci in our drama by Power, Malice and Avarice. Of these characters Cenci by virtue of his fuller treatment is more complex than the others, but how little the essential conception varied may be seen from a passage, descriptive of the tyrant in "Queen Mab," which in spirit if not in details could be applied without change to Count Cenci.

The king, the wearer of a gilded chain
That binds his soul to abjectness, the fool
Whom courtiers nickname monarch, whilst a slave
Even to the basest appetites—that man
Heeds not the shriek of penury; he smiles
At the deep curses which the destitute
Mutter in secret, and a sullen joy
Pervades his bloodless heart when thousands groan
But for those morsels which his wantonness
Wastes in unjoyous revelry, to save
All that they love from famine;

III. 30-40.

In one respect and in one respect only is there an important difference of nature between Count Cenci and the earlier Shel-

leyan impersonations of the despot. All of the others, like the king in "Queen Mab," are tainted with "abjectness;" that is, they are phantom figures without inherent strength of their own, who have been raised to positions of power by the subservience of the multitude, and are bound to vanish whenever this multitude shall assert its rights. Pure evil, unmixed with good, would be logically weak enough, and weak enough are its logical personifications in the earlier poems. The personality of Count Cenci is a much more substantial and convincing incarnation of the evil principle, because Shelley combined with exclusively evil characteristics the qualities of courage, subtlety, self-sufficiency, and personal ascendancy which made a villain really worthy of the fight.

To Shelley, tyranny and religious organization seemed always closely related. In "Queen Mab," "The Revolt of Islam," and "Rosalind and Helen," kings and priests are grouped together as allied oppressors of the world; in "Prometheus Unbound," Jupiter represents at once the temporal and the spiritual power among the gods. So we should expect to find Count Cenci, Shelley's tyrant par excellence, depicted as a man of outwardly religious or at least superstitious temperament.

This is exactly what we do find in the play, and it is in direct contradiction to the characterization in the source. The latter sums up Cenci's religious attitude as follows: "Sodomy was the least, and atheism the greatest of the vices of Francesco; as is proved by the tenor of his life; for he was three times accused of sodomy, and paid the sum of 100,000 crowns to government in commutation of the punishment rightfully awarded to this crime: and concerning his religion, it is sufficient to state, that he never frequented any church; and although he caused a small chapel dedicated to the apostle St. Thomas, to be built in the court of his palace, his intention in so doing was to bury there all his children, whom he cruelly hated."

Count Cenci is pictured by Shelley, on the other hand, as a believing Roman Catholic. He takes pains always to obtain the Papal absolution for his misdeeds, and prayers to God are often on his lips. In the mad course of crime his perverted

faith gives him a sense of entire protection—for he finds the representatives of religion subservient to him in this life, and expects with confidence the same treatment from the Supreme Ruler in the next. As Cenci's sense of his own power rises, he feels more and more the closeness of his alliance with the Omnipotent. Drunk with the intoxication of command and the lust of sway he regards the least disobedience to his will as almost equally a crime against his divine co-worker. This sense of equality with the Most High reaches its climax in the magnificent blasphemy in the scene before the murder, when after Cenci's curse upon Beatrice, Lucretia says:

For thine own sake unsay those dreadful words,
When high God grants he punishes such prayers IV. i. 137-8.

and Cenci, leaping to his feet, replies,

He does his will, I mine. IV. i. 139.

In the source, Cenci, sensualist and profligate, has little claim to loftiness of spirit; in Shelley's hands, on the contrary, he becomes an idealist of superb proportions. In working out the character Shelley lent it his own courage in opposition to the prescripts of society, and borrowed for it the pride of the heroes in Byron's romantic poems. Cenci is at war with his fellow men; he is conscious of the fact, and glories in it. Sufficient unto himself, he gains his delight from wantonly insulting public opinion and living a life of absolute personal freedom.

In the monograph upon "The Cenci" by Dr. Wilhelm Wagner, there is pointed out an apparent similarity between the avaricious conduct of Cenci in refusing to support his sons, and the attitude of Timothy Shelley toward the poet.¹ The unpleasant idea that Shelley may have had his own father in mind in his creation of Count Cenci, "the wickedest man on record," as Landor calls him, cannot be absolutely denied, but the analogy, if it existed in his thoughts, was not suffered to influence materially his treatment of the character. Cenci's avarice is already fully developed in the Italian source, and in the drama is exhibited as one of many means for the exercise

¹ Wilhelm Wagner, "Shelley's 'The Cenci,'" p. 49.

of a deep hatred of society much unlike anything in Timothy's shuffling disposition. Shelley had indeed a deep contempt for his father's stupidity and conservatism, but these characteristics do not appear in Cenci. The latter can surely be accounted for much better by the general nature of Shelley's beliefs than by any fancied resemblance to the respectable Member of Parliament from Horsham.

The order of the priesthood is twice represented in "The Cenci,"—in the persons of Orsino and Cardinal Camillo. The character of Orsino is altered from that in the source in accordance with Shelley's general attitude toward the clergy. In his tripartite division of mankind the priest is always numbered among the oppressors. "Queen Mab," "The Revolt of Islam," and "Rosalind and Helen," all picture him as an able minion of the tyrant, characterized chiefly by intolerance, hypocrisy, and treachery. So here, hypocrisy and treachery are made the chief characteristics of Orsino. Only the faintest suggestions of this temperament are to be found in the source, where the original of Orsino is described as follows: "The palace Cenci was sometimes visited by a Monsignore Guerra—a young man of handsome person and attractive manners, and of that facile character which might easily be induced to become a partner in any action good or evil as it might happen." Shelley deliberately blackens this character. The dishonorable nature of Orsino's passion for Beatrice is not suggested in the source, which says simply: "he was somewhat in love with Beatrice." Nor is there any hint that he was a traitor to Beatrice as well as to Cenci; on the contrary, the source explicitly says: "He was moved to a lively compassion of the state of Lucretia and Beatrice, who often related their increasing misery to him, and his pity was forever fed and augmented by some new tale of tyranny and cruelty." Also, Orsino's subtle insinuations, which play such a part in strengthening the half-formed designs of Giacomo and Beatrice, have no basis in the source. Thus the main lines of the character are due to Shelley alone.

The other representative of ecclesiasticism, Cardinal Camillo, is treated a little less unfavorably. In fact, his is a more nearly objective picture of the priest than any which the poet had pre-

viously drawn. Camillo's faults of subserviency and cowardice, and his habitual refusal to face the real problems are contemptible enough, but are far from the diabolical treachery of the Iberian priest in "The Revolt of Islam," or the frenzied bigotry of the churchman in "Queen Mab." He belongs rather to that type of the somewhat harmless clergyman so often ridiculed on the modern stage in plays of Ibsen, Jones, or Bernard Shaw:—the complacent conservative, who will hush up a scandal instead of destroying its cause, and who wishes above all things to maintain the existing order from which he derives his emoluments, but who is ready, nevertheless, to use such influence for good as he is able to exert without the slightest risk to himself. Camillo, even more than Orsino, is practically the creation of Shelley, as the only suggestions for such a figure in the source are the statements that, "The Pope, being informed of all that passed by Signor Ulysse Moraci, the judge employed in this affair, became suspicious that the beauty of Beatrice had softened the mind of this judge, and committed the cause to another;" and that after the defence by Beatrice's advocates, "Instead of retiring to rest, he [the Pope] spent the whole night in studying the cause with the Cardinal di San Marcello." Upon these two bare hints of a compassionate judge and a confidant of the Pope, Shelley elaborated the character of Camillo.

Let us now turn to the representative of resistance to tyranny. This type of character, also, was conceived by Shelley at the very beginning of his missionary period in the cause of atheism and democracy. The same "Fragments of Margaret Nicholson" of 1811 that denounced the tyrant, sang a fantastic epithalamium of Francis Ravallac and Charlotte Corday, in terms whose crudeness should not disguise the fact that we have here the germs of the characters of Laon and Cythna, Lionel and Helen, Prometheus, and Beatrice Cenci.

Yes, Francis! thine was the dear knife that tore
 A tyrant's heart strings from his guilty breast;
 Thine was the daring at a tyrant's gore
 To smile in triumph, to condemn the rest;
 And thine, loved glory of thy sex, to tear
 From its base shrine a despot's haughty soul,

To laugh at sorrow in secure despair,
 To mock, with smiles, life's lingering control,
 And triumph mid the griefs that round thy fate did roll. 51-59.

From the first, Shelley associated men and women on an equality in the work of redeeming humanity from oppression, or if at any time he made distinction, it was the woman whom he seemed to consider the more important factor. He conceived of her neither as a household drudge nor as a social belle, but as the comrade of man, fighting by his side in the struggle for freedom. This idea that Woman's function is a public instead of a purely domestic one,—an idea that has steadily gained ground since Shelley's day,—was fundamental in his treatment of the type which we are here considering. His heroes, whether men or women, are hardly differentiated by qualities of sex at all. The personalities of Laon and Cythna, for example, might be transposed without altering the sex of either. Beatrice, feminine as she is, is feminine in qualities which she has in common with Shelley. In her as in all of his heroes of humanity, whether masculine or feminine, Shelley objectified and idealized himself. Dr. Wagner suggests that the personality of Beatrice is modelled in part upon that of Mary Godwin Shelley.¹ It may be that her "cold fidelity," clear judgment, and insight into character were taken over by the poet from his faithful wife, but the more important qualities of Beatrice—her courage, independence, gentleness, and poetic eloquence—spring unmistakably from the temperament of the poet himself.

So, too, the normal situation of Shelley's heroes was determined by the circumstances of his own life. He was an unsuccessful reformer in an age of reaction when reform meant persecution, not success. His revolutionary heroes likewise are the victims of tyranny, and conquer spiritually only at the expense of physical defeat. Without exception, the touchstone of their nobility is the endurance of suffering: they all wear the robes of martyrdom. Laon and Cythna, Lionel, Prometheus, and Beatrice, persecuted, insulted, tortured, find their highest triumph in the spiritual greatness which can bear the utmost spite of Fortune with patient steadfastness.

¹ Wilhelm Wagner, "Shelley's 'The Cenci,'" p. 40.

Of them all, the heroine of "The Cenci" is by far the most moving. Although her activity is narrower in scope than that of the others, and she befriends only her immediate family instead of whole nations, nevertheless she possesses the same qualities elsewhere assigned by Shelley to his saviours of the world. Her spiritual torments, however, are more intense than theirs, and the sympathy aroused by them is proportionately greater. Inasmuch as the moral significance of the drama mainly depends upon the understanding of her character, a somewhat detailed analysis of it may be pardoned here.

The character is far from complex, although it seems so by contrast to the bare sketch in the source, whose suggestions were freely enlarged and altered by Shelley. As in the case of Count Cenci the most pronounced change is in respect to the religious attitude. Beatrice is pictured in the chronicle as a Roman Catholic of the most orthodox type. According to it she left 15,000 crowns in her will to the Fraternity of the Sacre Stimmate; on the night before the execution she passed considerable time in the recitation of psalms and prayers, and on the fatal morning she and Lucretia "confessed, heard mass, and received the holy communion." Her last words on the scaffold were: "Most beloved Jesus who, relinquishing thy divinity, becamest a man; and did through love purge my sinful soul also of its original sin with thy precious blood; deign, I beseech thee, to accept that which I am about to shed at thy most merciful tribunal, as a penalty which may cancel my many crimes and spare me a part of that punishment justly due to me."

This conventional character was strikingly and subtly changed by Shelley. From the beginning, Beatrice is depicted as intensely religious, but her religion is hardly at any time that of a Roman Catholic. She prays to God and communes with him directly, finding no need for the interposition of saints, Virgin, or Jesus, whose names are never uttered. The reliance upon the ritual of litany, mass, and confession, so prominent in the Italian narrative, is entirely omitted by Shelley. The relation of Beatrice to the ecclesiastics Orsino and Cardinal Camillo is not the spiritually subordinate relation of a Roman

Catholic woman, however noble, to the prelates of her Church, but the English woman's relation of free equality.

Beatrice looks for help not to the Church but to God Himself. In the banquet scene of the first act she tells the assembled guests how she has

... knelt down through the long sleepless nights,
And lifted up to God the father of all,
Passionate prayers: I. iii. 117-19.

to be released from her dreadful situation. After Cenci's horrible crime she thinks of suicide, but repulses the thought because,

Many might doubt there were a God above
Who sees and permits evil, and so die;
That faith no agony shall obscure in me. III. i. 100-3.

It is with a prayer to God that she retires to meditate upon the possibility of escape from the hideous degradation that has enfolded her:

I pray thee, God,
Let me not be bewildered while I judge III. i. 126-7.

and it is with a belief in God's sanction that she determines upon just retribution:

I have prayed
To God, and I have talked with my own heart,
And have unravelled my entangled will,
And have at length determined what is right. III. i. 218-21.

Thus Beatrice, like her father, identifies her cause with that of God, but where Cenci's God was a God of Power, hers is a God of Justice. The confidence that God will right her wrongs, and that the murder of her father is a sacred deed, upholds her. When the act is close at hand, she asks the murderers, confidently,

Ye know it is a high and holy deed? IV. iii. 35.

Immediately after it has been committed, she tells Marzio,

Thou wert a weapon in the hand of God
To a just use. IV. iii. 54-5.

During these scenes of anguish when her soul has seemed to stand before God Himself asking His approval, the world's

probable opinion of her act has hardly occurred to Beatrice. With the coming of Savella immediately after the murder, she finds herself face to face with a new problem. Her act was a righteous act—this is her deepest faith—and the consciousness of her renewed purity makes life once more desirable; but against her suddenly arise men who call this holiest act of hers a crime. She has no reason to trust in justice at their hands; when has she ever seen them render justice? She is determined to believe that God approves her act; if he does approve he cannot let her be punished for it; and yet in her heart she knows that if she acknowledges the act she will be punished, and God's justice will be mocked. She is accused of the murder of a father, but the man she killed was no father to her. If she be sentenced, injustice will have been proved more powerful than justice, Cenci more powerful than God. Not merely her own life but her faith in the moral order is at stake. If it but be vindicated, what matter a few more tortures of herself, or of Marzio, Lucretia, and Giacomo?

Such was probably the underlying psychology of the situation as it appealed to Shelley. But he certainly did not succeed in making this unusual psychology sufficiently clear to be at all manifest to an ordinary theatrical audience during the rapid progress of stage representation. The reviews of the performance of the play in 1886 show plainly that Beatrice's denial of her act completely alienated the sympathy of the critics, of whom there was none so poor to do her reverence after the trial scene.

To a certain extent this view evidenced a sounder moral judgment than was shown in Shelley's conception of the character. At best Beatrice's falsehoods are the result of a casuistry far from fearless, and are inconsistent with the frank directness of her earlier acts. It is probable that Shelley hardly realized the existence of this inconsistency, since, like the nobler qualities of Beatrice, it is the reflection of an element in his own character. However much we may love and reverence the general nobility and purity of Shelley's personality, it is vain to deny that he combined with an extraordinary love of abstract truth and readiness to suffer for it,

a considerable degree of laxity in his concrete practise. Whoever is disposed to doubt this fact may be referred to the eighteenth chapter of "The Real Shelley" by John Cordy Jeaffreson, where that unamiable, but not unintelligent writer gives a long list of alleged falsehoods, only a part of which can possibly be explained away.

Shelley's inaccuracies of statement, however, like Beatrice's, can usually be interpreted as having been in the interest of "a higher truth." His attitude on the subject is explicitly stated in his "Essay on Christianity," where, in defence of certain seeming insincerities of Jesus Christ, he says:

"It is deeply to be lamented that a word should ever issue from human lips, which contains the minutest alloy of dissimulation, or hypocrisy, or exaggeration, or anything but the precise and rigid image which is present to the mind and which ought to dictate the expression. But the practise of utter sincerity towards other men would avail to no good end, if they were incapable of practising it towards their own minds. In fact, truth cannot be communicated until it is perceived. The interests, therefore, of truth require that an orator should, as far as possible, produce in his hearers that state of mind on which alone his exhortations could fairly be contemplated and examined."¹

This attitude explains Shelley's retention of Beatrice's false denial as given in the source when he changed her character and deeds in so many other respects. So keenly does he feel the injustice of her situation and her right to demand aid from God, that her insincerity toward the cruel world seems to him no evidence of any weakness of character. After the trial, as before, she retains her sense of perfect innocence and expectation of God's help. Even after the final confession of the others of her family, Beatrice still clings to this hope and with it comforts them:

The God who knew my wrong and made
Our speedy act the angel of his wrath,
Seems, and but seems, to have abandoned us.
Let us not think that we shall die for this. V. iii. 113-16.

¹ Shelley's *Works*, Forman edition, vi. 360.

Her thought is entirely, be it observed, upon this world. If God's justice is not redeemed here, the stern logic of her life gives no reason for belief in its existence elsewhere. Hence when the news of the condemnation is received, her outburst of rebellion is inevitable. It is not primarily the unexpected reality of death, though this suddenly strikes chill upon her warm consciousness of youth, but it is the blank annihilation of all in which she trusted that causes her despair. For the first time she sees the universe in its soulless horror:

No God, no Heaven, no Earth in the void world,
The wide, grey, lampless, deep, unpeopled world. V. iv. 58-9.

But her weakness is only momentary. Once more she rallies her spirit to endure to the end. In the consciousness of her own integrity she finds a last consolation. Although God has permitted even greater wrongs without intervention, although her faith in Him has at last grown cold, her sense of truth and right does not waver. She knows that she is innocent of guilt. A passionate sense of her justification moulds her final words to Bernardo:

One thing more, my child,
For thine own sake be constant to the love
Thou bearest us; and to the faith that I,
Though wrapped in a strange cloud of crime and shame
Lived ever holy and unstained. V. iv. 145-9.

Where then is the "tragic error" without which some students of the drama will not be satisfied with the character? Shelley, probably familiar enough with this demand, points out in his preface that it was Beatrice's natural, but nevertheless blameworthy, desire for revenge which made her a tragic character. But this desire for revenge is emphasized much more in the preface than in the drama. To be sure immediately after the outrage Beatrice does say:

Aye, something must be done;
What, yet I know not . . . something which shall make
The thing that I have suffered but a shadow
In the dread lightning which avenges it. III. i. 86-9.

And a little later she speaks of expiation (III. i. 151) and atonement (III. i. 215). It is not revenge of this past wrong,

however, but prevention of its else certain repetition that really dictates the murder.

I pray thee, God,
 Let me not be bewildered while I judge.
 If I must live day after day, and keep
 These limbs, the unworthy temple of thy spirit,
 As a foul den from which what thou abhorrest
 May mock thee, unavenged. . . . it shall not be III. i. 126-31.
 . . . lest I be reserved, day after day,
 To load with crimes an overburdened soul,
 And be . . . what ye can dream not. III. i. 216-18.

After the death of Cenci it is not any expression of gratified revenge which we hear from Beatrice, but peaceful words of confidence in a world from which evil has at last been driven away.

Let us retire to counterfeit deep rest;
 I hardly need to counterfeit it now:
 The spirit which doth reign within these limbs
 Seems strangely undisturbed. I could even sleep
 Fearless and calm: all ill is surely past. IV. iii. 61-5.

The feeling of the sympathetic reader of the drama in regard to the murder is well expressed by Swinburne:¹ "Il y aura toujours, comme il y a toujours eu, des êtres humains envers lesquels l'humanité n'a qu'un seul devoir: les supprimer, les exterminer, les anéantir; sinon de par la loi, de par l'arrêt de la conscience universelle. Ayant en elle cette foi profonde, Béatrice rend à l'enfer ce qui est à l'enfer—l'âme du comte Francesco Cenci." If this be true, Beatrice is fundamentally a pathetic character; one who is driven to her deeds and death not by any inherent "tragic error" but by the sin of circumstances. We do not find poetic justice operative in her case. The moral victory at the end of the play rests on no vindication of the external order, but solely on the inner steadfastness of Beatrice.

More has been made of the pessimistic side of this conclusion as expressing Shelley's personal conviction of the nature of

¹ *The Cenci*, Mme. Tola Dorian's translation with preface by A. C. Swinburne, Paris 1883, p. xiii.

the world than the facts seem to warrant. The reviewers in his own day assumed of course that it was but another expression of his early "atheism," and even so recent a critic as Professor Jack calls the speech of Beatrice on receiving the news of her condemnation the plainest utterance of Shelley's own religious despair. We must remember, however, that "The Cenci" was written immediately after the third act of "Prometheus Unbound" and only shortly before the fourth act, either of which might be called a plain utterance of Shelley's transcendental faith. But while Shelley had abandoned his youthful materialism, he had not yet come completely under the sway of the abstract Platonism which was later to govern his thought, and at this time his philosophy seems to have been rather indeterminate. Disbelieving in the existence of a personal God, and probably intellectually agnostic as to the question whether there is any absolute moral government of the world, he still cherished an intense love of universal life. This took the place of a definite religion for him, and was equally consistent with moments of the most radiant hope or of the darkest doubt. Such a mental condition is not the least favorable one for the composition of great literature, and it enabled Shelley to throw himself with equal sympathy into the raptures of Prometheus and the despair of Beatrice.

The minor characters in "The Cenci" are of little importance or interest and need no very long discussion. They belong to the great class of "Slaves," the passive victims or agents of oppression, representatives of that mass of mankind for which Shelley had large hopes in the future but little respect in the present.

Lucretia, the chief of them, is an amiable, weak creature who moves through the play in a state of dignified helplessness. She is not animated by Beatrice's sense of the justice of their deed, and in vain tries to imitate the attitude of innocence. Her morality is not a matter of her own inner consciousness but of the external decrees of men. No intervention of God in their behalf is expected by her, and from the very fact that her religious sense is so much weaker than that of Beatrice it suffers from no shock of disillusionment. She attempts to

comfort Beatrice's despair by words of conventional consolation, and to the very end entirely fails to comprehend the real issues at stake.

Giacomo is of the same type, but worse. He is a complaining figure, his soul filled with the sense of family wrongs, yet lacking the energy needful to right them. In him we see worked out Shelley's conception of the despicable nature of remorse. When told by Orsino of the discovery of the murder, Giacomo bursts out into loud wailings about its having been a "wicked thought" and "piteous deed," just as if the discovery of the deed had changed its nature. When his confession has destroyed his sister's chance of life, he is anew filled with remorse:

Have I confessed? Is it all over now?
 No hope! No refuge! O, weak, wicked tongue
 Which hast destroyed me, would that thou hadst been
 Cut out and thrown to dogs first. To have killed
 My father first, and then betrayed my sister; V. iii. 96-100.

In Beatrice's calm answer, we hear the utterance of one of Shelley's deepest convictions, expressed in many other places in his poetry:

What 'twas weak to do,
 Tis weaker to lament once being done:
 Take cheer! V. iii. 111-13.

The character of Bernardo is the least satisfactory creation in the play. In Shelley's translation of the source this son of Count Cenci is given as twenty-six years old. In the drama he is manifestly much younger, but Shelley appears never to have taken the trouble to determine just what his age was to be, for it seems to vary from scene to scene in accordance with the mood and situation. He is first introduced to us in the second act weeping because his father has struck Lucretia, and telling her how good a mother she has been to him. A few lines further on he declares that he will never leave her even though the Pope should permit him to live like others of his age "in some blithe place" "with sports, and delicate food and the fresh air." The speech is not a natural one for a boy of any age to have uttered, but taken in conjunction with the previous

weeping it does leave us with the impression of a mere child of overdeveloped sensibilities and cloistered delicacy. His next appearance is after the murder, when on being questioned by Savella whether he could name any who had an interest in Cenci's death, he replies:

Alas!

I can name none who had not, and those most
Who most lament that such a deed is done;
My mother, and my sister, and myself. IV. iv. 67-70.

Here the simple sincerity of the answer is childlike, but the antithesis of the expression is quite the reverse. And what shall we say of Bernardo's next speech, in the first prison scene of the fifth act, as he watches the sleeping Beatrice?

How gently slumber rests upon her face,
Like the last thoughts of some day sweetly spent
Closing in night and dreams, and so prolonged. V. iii. 1-3.

Yet a few minutes later he has resumed the simple thought and words of childhood when he asks Beatrice to confess:

If indeed
It can be true, say so, dear sister mine;
And then the Pope will surely pardon you;
And all be well. V. iii. 57-60.

In the last scene of the drama, on the other hand, he might be almost of an age with Beatrice:

They come! Let me
Kiss those warm lips before their crimson leaves
Are blighted . . . white . . . cold. Say farewell, before
Death chokes that gentle voice! O, let me hear
You speak. V. iv. 137-41.

Yet in spite of this vagueness and careless inconsistency in the characterization of Bernardo, the tenderness of the relationship between the brother and sister is made real and convincing. Shelley's conception of it may have been in part influenced by his memory of the early affection which had existed between himself and his sister Elizabeth.

But on the whole the best that can be said of these minor characters is that they are barely adequate. The probability is that Shelley was not much interested in them, since they

involved no great spiritual issues, and that he deliberately threw all the main power of his inspiration upon the two chief characters, Beatrice and Cenci, feeling that in them lay the problem for him to solve.

This problem, as we have seen, was not that of objective characterization, but of the realistic embodiment of certain abstract ideas. The remarkable earnestness of these ideas in Shelley's mind is nowhere better shown than in the success with which he here made them over into living human beings. Beatrice is surely an ennobling vision of maidenly purity and heroic courage. Cenci is surely a powerful incarnation of awful vice. No characters equally moving were produced by any other English dramatist of the century. Although they took their rise, not from observation of the complex workings of human life, but merely from the aspirations and fears of one intense soul, their validity is equal to the sincerity and power of that soul.

VIII

STYLE

In writing "The Cenci," Shelley was confronted by two antithetic ideals of style, both of which he seems clearly to have recognized. On the one hand, he was writing a more realistic piece than he had before attempted, and his language needed to be clear and simple enough to represent the usual speech of men in a way to be immediately understood by an ordinary audience in the theater. On the other hand, in dealing with so repulsive a subject as that of "The Cenci" unusual beauty of language was required to raise it to the poetic level. Thus the double necessity of realism and idealism, which confronts every artist in every work of art, presented itself here to Shelley in an accentuated form. That he perceived the need for idealization, the following statement from his preface makes plain: "The person who would treat such a subject must increase the ideal and diminish the actual horror of the events, so that the pleasure which arises from the poetry which exists in these tempestuous sufferings and crimes may mitigate the pain of the contemplation of the moral deformity from which they spring." He felt that this idealization could properly be accomplished in a drama only through the fusion of imagery and passion. "Imagination," he says in his preface, "is as the immortal God which should assume flesh for the redemption of mortal passion." To such passionate imagination he seems chiefly to have trusted for the poetic effect of his drama. "In other respects," he continues, "I have written more carelessly; that is, without an overfastidious and learned choice of words. In this respect I entirely agree with those modern critics who assert that in order to move men to true sympathy we must use the familiar language of men."

As to Shelley's idealization of this style by means of imagery there has been question. The proper mean to be observed in

a poetic drama between superfluity and paucity of imagery depends so largely upon personal taste that it is not surprising that Shelley has been attacked upon both scores. Thus Mr. John M. Robertson, as we have seen,¹ accuses Shelley of introducing continually "the merest of mere poetry," and cites one instance in proof of his charge. On the other hand we find *The Observer* of May 9, 1886, saying, "Few indeed are the passages which, like Beatrice's noble descriptive speech at the beginning of the third act, make any attempt to relieve the gloom appropriate to monotonous infamy of the blackest type."

These opposed opinions become more explicable when we consider the nature of Shelley's imagination, for most of his imagery in "The Cenci" is very little, if at all sensuous. It gives us no sense of the verity of the external world, and leaves no vivid concrete picture in our mind. Shelley's vocabulary was early moulded by his continual reading of philosophy, and his later slight accumulation of beautiful and concrete words never entirely superseded their predecessors. And even more fundamental than this philosophical diction is Shelley's temperamental preference for an intellectual conception rather than a concrete picture. Objects gained significance for him not so much when seen pictorially as when revealed in their inner relation to other objects. He never entirely lost the characteristics of a metaphysician who had turned poet, and his interest was always in ideas or emotions generated by ideas, rather than in sensations or emotions generated by sensations. This concern with abstractions, this lack of sensuousness, is a fundamental artistic defect that of itself would serve to place Shelley's work forever on a lower plane than that of world poets of the type of Shakespeare and Milton.

Yet like most of the defects of great writers, this of Shelley's is one which we could ill afford to do without, for it is indissolubly connected with one of his most characteristic merits. Owing to his passionately abstract nature and the intensity of emotion with which he regarded generic ideas, Shelley brought into the realm of poetry much that was before unknown there. No other modern English poet, not even Coleridge in his most

¹ Pp. 23-24.

philosophical period, has ever been so intensely interested in pure ideas, or has made them so strangely emotional. Imagery, without being picturesque, may still serve to elucidate some hidden and significant relationship of thought, or may exalt and universalize the feelings. Shelley's continually does both. Subtle correspondences between man and external nature are suggested, and each is interpreted in the light of the other. Emotions are lifted above the immediately personal plane, and are given a broader meaning by connection with larger facts of life. Thus we meet continually in Shelley's works the curious phenomenon of poetry that is not directly sensuous, but is, nevertheless, thoroughly impassioned. In "The Cenci" this stylistic peculiarity is especially frequent, owing to the subordination of references to nature and the predominance of intellectual ideas.

How far Shelley really attempted to relieve the gloom of the situation by the introduction of imaginative passages, and how far such passages are not intimately associated with the dramatic passions of the characters can easily be determined. An enumeration of all the figurative passages in several sections of the play yields the result that, on the average, one in every three lines contains some imaginative coloring.¹ And in the vast majority of cases these figures are so fused with the emotion of the character that by no possible justice can they be called "mere poetry" as opposed to "dramatic poetry." In addition to the one instance cited by Mr. Robertson, I can find only three others in the entire play to which especial exception could be taken on the score of their being dramatically irrelevant:

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| II. ii. 70, 71. | And we are left, as scorpions ringed with fire.
What should we do but strike ourselves to death? |
| V. ii. 170, 171. | Let tortures strain the truth till it be white
As snow thrice-sifted by the frozen wind. |
| V. iv. 138, 139. | Kiss those warm lips before their crimson leaves
Are blighted . . . white . . . cold. |

And if a true dramatic criticism would expunge even these brief figures, one shudders to think how many lines would

¹ I. i. 39 out of 147 lines; II. ii. 52 out of 161 lines; V. ii. 62 out of 195 lines; V. iv. 66 out of 165 lines.

necessarily be pruned from our finest Elizabethan plays by a no more severe judgment.

Furthermore, the imagery in "The Cenci" is expressed with admirable brevity. In only three instances is a single figure carried over more than three lines, and usually not more than one line is directly involved. It is usually not the explicit simile or metaphor that is employed, but the less obtrusive and more dramatically suitable trope. In this way, Shelley's fancy, one of the most copious in our literature, expressed itself in "The Cenci" with a chastened restraint that elevated, without impeding the style. A few conventional phrases are, indeed, occasionally employed, but these are more than counterbalanced by the instances of beautifully significant imagery which seem to flash a sudden light of illumination over the illustrated thought. I give in illustration some lines from one of Orsino's soliloquies:

II. ii. 132-147.

There is no escape . . .

*Her bright form kneels beside me at the altar,
And follows me to the resort of men,
And fills my slumber with tumultuous dreams,
So when I wake my blood seems liquid fire
And if I strike my damp and dizzy head
My hot palm scorches it: her very name,
But spoken by a stranger, makes my heart
Sicken and pant; and thus unprofitably
I clasp the phantom of unfelt delights
Till weak imagination half possesses
The self-created shadow. Yet much longer
Will I not nurse this life of feverous hours:
From the unravelled hopes of Giacomo
I must work out my own dear purposes.
I see, as from a tower, the end of all:*

The general characteristics of Shelley's imagination appear, also, in his epithets. In most cases these are emotional, but not vividly sensuous. And even when both sensuous and emotional, the radiance of his finest epithets pales if brought into comparison with the impassioned glow in the chosen adjectives of Keats or Milton. On the other hand, Shelley's epithets are never so commonplace as many of Wordsworth's nor so sentimental as many of Coleridge's. If less brilliantly pictur-

esque than the adjectives of Byron, they have a far wider intellectual significance. That tendency to combine the subtly intellectual and the keenly emotional, which formed the peculiar characteristic of Shelley's imagination, is clearly seen in the epithets of "The Cenci"; for example:

- V. iii. 40-41. Shall the light multitude
 Fling, at their choice curses, or *faded pity*,
V. iv. 59. The *wide, grey, lampless, deep, unpeopled world*

Whatever be the final judgment as to the imaginative and poetic quality of the diction in "The Cenci," Shelley's success in attaining a realistic style is not likely to be denied. Wordsworth's general theory of diction, to which Shelley gave allegiance in his preface, was put into practise without any of the disastrous results too often achieved by Wordsworth himself. While the vast majority of the words in "The Cenci" are those of ordinary conversation, rarely does there occur any suggestion of the trivial or the banal.

On the other hand, while realistic, the style does not adhere absolutely to the "familiar language of men." There abound in "The Cenci" the time honored poetic abbreviations such as *o'er, ere, wert, 'twill, 'twere, 'twas, 'tis, scarce*; a few other words from the conventional poetic vocabulary also occur, such as *ye, prithee, aye, aught, naught, none else, yester night, yester evening, overburthened, blazoned*. Poetic constructions occasionally appear, as in *did thirst*, and *knew not aught*, and Shelley throughout is fond of utilizing the poet's privilege of accenting final *ed*, as in *accursèd, agèd, loathèd, wingèd, armèd, veinèd*.

Like Keats, Shelley was fond of inventing unusual and striking compound words. While on the whole inferior to his rival in the felicity with which he did this, he creates some compounds of memorable value:

- II. ii. 110. Such *self-anatomy* shall teach the will
III. ii. 3-5. If so the shaft
 Of *mercy-winged* lightning would not fall
 On stones and trees.
IV. i. 104, 105. With what but with a father's curse doth God
 Panic-strike armèd victory,

Shelley's favorite negative suffix "less" is not so ubiquitous in "The Cenci" as in many of his works, although it appears in such unusual combinations as *shelterless*, and *parentless*. Like Milton, Shelley delights in Latin words with the negative prefix "un," such as *unexpostulating*, *undistinguishable*, *unshrived* and *unforgiven*, *unimaginable*, *unpolluted*, *unutterable*, *unreplenished*. The influence of his classical scholarship appears not infrequently in Latin words that are used according to their root meanings, in senses slightly differing from the normal English denotation:

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| III. ii. 64 | <i>Degraded</i> from his post? And Marzio, |
| IV. i. 36. | If God, to punish his <i>enormous</i> crimes |
| V. iv. 122. | Even till the heart is <i>vacant</i> and despairs, |

A few curious superlatives in "est" are created by Shelley to avoid the more cumbrous customary forms: such are *selectest*, *justest*, *serenest*, *rightfulest*.

On the whole, Shelley's diction in "The Cenci" is probably sufficiently characteristic so that, in the contingency suggested by Mr. Hillard of the play's having been first discovered to-day in an anonymous manuscript, we should have been enabled to determine the author with considerable assurance. It is simple and perspicuous, and yet is capable of expressing a high degree of intellectual subtlety. Through its realism it is enabled to transact well the business of ordinary conversation and the communication of ordinary information, while through its tropical character it rises easily to the utterance of lofty and fervid passion.

Of the larger elements of style in "The Cenci," perhaps the most noticeable is perfect clearness. This quality is, of course, of especial importance in any dramatic composition designed for the stage, yet few dramatic writers have attained, even after many attempts, the degree of success that Shelley reached, apparently almost without effort, in this, his maiden drama. With the exception of the contemporary reviewers, it may be doubted if anyone of maturity and education has ever read "The Cenci" without being able to understand the literal meaning of every passage.

This is due in part to the brevity and simplicity of the sentence structure. Whereas in the "Prometheus Unbound" sentences of more than ten lines are common, and not a few of more than twenty lines occur,¹ in "The Cenci" the former are unusual, and there is only one example of the latter.² The average sentence length in "The Cenci" is only between two and three lines. So, too, the structure is usually simple, or if complex, is of the loose type, unfolding its meaning with each clause. The involved periodic sentence, of which Shelley showed full command in "Alastor" and "Prometheus Unbound," is rarely used in "The Cenci," its occurrence being normally restricted to the more declamatory passages. Noticeable inversions, ellipses, parentheses, and anacoloutha are generally entirely avoided. In this way, although Shelley's style sacrificed an element of variety, it gained an unusual and almost transparent lucidity.

But the sentence structure of "The Cenci" is also highly rhetorical in character. Shelley's youthful fondness for dialectic and argument had led him to an acquaintance with the formal elements of oratorical style as early as "Queen Mab." In that poem the exclamatory sentences, rhetorical questions, and emphatic repetitions are used so baldly and with such insufficient weight of subject-matter that they sometimes seem bombastic enough. Yet even here the oratorical ability of the boy author is plain, and his periods often move us through sheer skilful phrasing, despite their exaggerated content. From the time of "Queen Mab" until the composition of "The Cenci," however, Shelley devoted himself mainly to the development of a more purely poetic style, and his natural tendency towards declamation remained unexercised, save for a few passages in "The Revolt of Islam" and "Prometheus Unbound."

In "The Cenci" Shelley's eloquence reappears on a far higher level than in "Queen Mab." The situations in the

¹ It should be borne in mind, however, that Shelley, like the other Romanticists, and like Milton, employed the colon and semicolon more freely than present usage would permit, so that many of these sentences would be subdivided if written today.

² Beatrice's description of the ravine, III. i. 243-66. This long sentence is broken by semicolons.

drama furnish a content that justifies such vigorous and emphatic speeches of rebuke, appeal, command, scorn, and despair, that we are in no danger of receiving the impression of a style inflated beyond the emotion that it is designed to convey. The means of eloquence are in the main handled by Shelley with a temperance that prevents monotony, and that gives to each speech its due weight of importance.

The specific means used by him are the customary stylistic devices for obtaining emphasis. Among them, Shelley's favorite is the cumulative repetition of phrase construction; he uses this as frequently as he dares, and often with fine rhetorical effect. One example must suffice:

V. ii. 145-53.

Think, I adjure you, what it is to slay
The reverence living in the minds of men
Towards our ancient house, and stainless fame.
Think what it is to strangle infant pity,
Cradled in the belief of guileless looks,
Till it become a crime to suffer. Think
What 'tis to blot with infamy and blood
All that which shows like innocence, and is,
Hear me, great God! I swear, most innocent,¹

That more open instrument of eloquence, the rhetorical question, needs to be used with more caution, and once in a while Shelley over-uses it. Thus, for example, the accusatory speech of Cenci, in the first scene of the second act, is one continuous stream of rhetorical questions, powerful at first, but monotonous before we reach the end. Occasionally, also, Shelley employs the device in an unnatural and artificial manner, as at the beginning of Beatrice's speech at the banquet (I. iii. 100-108), where its occurrence suggests an amount of forensic control untrue to the spirit of the scene. Usually, however, in "The Cenci," its appearance is unobtrusive, yet most effective, and Shelley sometimes obtains by its means a dramatic expression of high persuasiveness:²

¹ Other noticeable instances of this use of repetition are: I. iii. 30-34, 111-131, 132-37; II. i. 63-73, 89-94; II. ii. 76-82, 133-36; III. i. 108-111, 172-77, 184-93, 218-222, 289-96; III. ii. 18-24, 54-58; IV. i. 91-94, 115-18; IV. iv. 177-87; V. ii. 140-44; V. iii. 70-76; V. iv. 101-108.

² V. iv. 68-75. Additional examples of the rhetorical question: II. i. 130-48, 151-56, 181-84; IV. i. 3-9; V. iii. 28-45.

For was he not alone omnipotent
On Earth, and ever present? Even tho' dead,
Does not his spirit live in all that breathe,
And work for me and mine still the same ruin,
Scorn, pain, despair? Who ever yet returned
To teach the laws of death's untrodden realm?
Unjust perhaps as those which drive us now,
O, whither, whither?

The employment of the usually rather artificial figure of apostrophe was rendered peculiarly natural and easy for Shelley by his normal tendency toward personification. This tendency runs through all his poetry from the opening line of "Queen Mab" to the conclusion of the "Triumph of Life." Shelley's monistic philosophy, his love of nature, his passionate aspiration after the ideal, all led to his regarding every thought or object in the universe as possessed of a personality equal to that of his own being. Thus throughout his poetry abstract ideas and natural phenomena mingle with the poet's self in one interrelated brotherhood. It is not strange, therefore, that in his hands the figure of apostrophe loses all appearance of affectation, and becomes thoroughly spontaneous. Usually, in "The Cenci," it occurs in sudden waves of impassioned feeling, as in Beatrice's exclamation, just before Cenci's death, when she herself snatches up a dagger to slay him:¹

IV. iii. 31-32.

Hadst thou a tongue to say

She murdered her own father, I must do it!

But there also occur more elaborate instances. Of these probably the most powerful is that in Cenci's curse upon Beatrice:²

IV. i. 128-36.

Earth, in the name of God, let her food be
Poison, until she be encrusted round
With leprous stains! Heaven, rain upon her head
The blistering drops of the Maremma's dew,
Till she be speckled like a toad; parch up
Those love-enkindled lips, warp those fine limbs
To loathed lameness! All beholding sun,
Strike in thine envy those life-darting eyes
With thine own blinding beams!

¹ Additional instances of brief apostrophe: III. i. 117-18, 177-79; IV. i. 177-80, 183-85.

² Additional instances of elaborate apostrophe: I. iii. 77-89; III. ii. 8-15.

Exclamation is another figure whose use requires discretion. In its employment Shelley is not always happy in his choice of phrases, which sometimes seem unnatural and affected. Such exclamations, for example, as Beatrice's "O, world! O, life! O, day! O, misery!" (III. i. 32), Lucretia's "O, terror! O, despair!" (IV. iv. 19), or Bernardo's "O, life! O, world!" (V. iv. 128), belong to the language of the stage instead of to that of real life. Far more frequent and successful is Shelley's use of the normal declarative sentence in an exclamatory manner to express sudden outbursts of feeling. The most noteworthy instance is afforded at the beginning of the third act by the speech of Beatrice, which is one succession of exclamations of horror, the bewildered expression of a tortured mind, unable to do more than report its impressions without power to coördinate them into thought. I need quote only a part of the passage in illustration:¹

III. i. 8-15.

The pavement sinks under my feet! The walls
Spin round! I see a woman weeping there,
And standing calm and motionless, whilst I
Slide giddily as the world reels. . . . My God!
The beautiful blue heaven is flecked with blood!
The sunshine on the floor is black! The air
Is changed to vapours such as the dead breathe
In charnel pits!

The two most pronouncedly intellectual of rhetorical figures are antithesis and irony. Of these, the former is rarely used by Shelley. His temperament was the reverse of epigrammatic, and his emotional, expansive utterance could hardly find congenial the rigid limits of the balanced structure. Nevertheless, this did not altogether lie outside of his range, as the not infelicitous, if infrequent, instances in "The Cenci" bear witness:²

III. i. 282-8.

We

Are now no more, as once, parent and child,
But man to man; the oppressor to the oppressed;

¹ Other instances of an eloquent use of this exclamatory sentence are: I. iii. 137-41; III. i. 365-73.

² Additional instances of antithesis: III. i. 200-3, 387-90; V. ii. 132-5.

The slanderer to the slandered ; foe to foe :
 He has cast nature off, which was his shield,
 And nature casts him off, who is her shame ;
 And I spurn both.

Instances of irony are more numerous. Quite devoid of humor as he was, and all too serious by nature, Shelley nevertheless possessed no inconsiderable fund of wit, as is evidenced in parts of "Peter Bell the Third" and "Swellfoot the Tyrant," where, as in "The Cenci," it takes the form of irony. Shelley had a natural command of this delicate weapon whose use he never developed as he might have done. In "The Cenci" it is employed with varying degrees of subtlety, ranging from the open and repeated sneers of Cenci¹ to the suppressed but piercing bitterness of Beatrice in such lines as these:²

I. iii. 124-25. Ye may soon share such merriment again
 As fathers make over their children's graves.

V. iv. 109-12. No, Mother, we must die :
 Since such is the reward of innocent lives ;
 Such the alleviation of worst wrongs.

In all these various ways, Shelley has developed in "The Cenci" a style that in its frequent pointedness and almost continual emphasis is thoroughly dramatic. In these respects it differs remarkably from his normal poetic style, and offers a proof of rhetorical versatility not elsewhere seen so clearly in his work.

Does "The Cenci," however, possess the supreme dramatic quality of style—concision? In that case, it would not only differ from the work of Shelley's English contemporaries, none of whom was able to boast of this gift in any high degree, but it would differ preëminently from all the other long poems of Shelley himself. But "The Cenci" forms in this respect no real exception to the general type of his work. While never unpleasantly diffuse, nor so copious in words as to hinder the thought, Shelley is very far from expressing his ideas in the briefest manner possible. His tendency in "The Cenci," as elsewhere, is always towards amplification. Although his cus-

¹ II. i. 130-48.

² Additional instances of irony : I. i. 27-33 ; I. iii. 4-14, 139-41 ; III. i. 72-73, 203-06.

tomary amplification by means of elaborate imagery is, as we have seen, carefully avoided in "The Cenci," expansion by synonyms or synonymous phrases is constantly employed. Thus we find Giacomo, when he learns of Beatrice's demands for Cenci's murder, saying:

III. i. 362-5.

My doubts are well appeased;
There is a higher reason for the act
Than mine; there is a holier judge than me,¹
A more unblamed avenger.

No doubt there is emphasis here, and eloquence. There is also a subtle variation of the idea, while it is enforced by the repetition. Nevertheless we feel that Shelley is playing with the expressional possibilities of Giacomo's emotion, instead of giving us the very heart of it. If it be answered that the weak Giacomo would probably have spoken thus, what shall we say to the following speech of Beatrice herself?

III. i. 107-13.

What are the words which you would have me speak?
I, who can feign no image in my mind
Of that which has transformed me: I whose thought
Is like a ghost shrouded and folded up
In its own formless horror: *of all words,*
That minister to mortal intercourse,
Which wouldst thou hear?

This passage is typical of the whole drama. The dialogue in general is expressed with a lyric amplitude of emotional detail; each feeling is dwelt upon and drawn out so that every shade of its significance may be made plain. Shelley dares not trust himself to a single terse utterance, lest it should not do justice to his subject. He is unwilling to merge the minor accompanying elements of an experience in its one fundamental feeling. His style cuts to the bone, but it does not stab to the heart. It lacks the inevitableness of Shakespeare, it lacks the terrible intensity of Webster. It is a style of valiant experimentation rather than one of assured finality.

Yet exceptional cases of supreme mastery occur. Such are

¹This seems to be an instance like several others which have been pointed out in Shelley's poetry, where the poet's sense of melody—in this case alliteration in m—has taken precedence over his regard for grammar.

the universally admired last speech of Beatrice, portions of the preceding prison scene, and parts of the two scenes connected with the murder. These passages are truly final.

Throughout the entire play all but the highest dramatic style is actually attained. Shelley shows a lucidity not only superior to that of his rivals in the nineteenth century, save Byron and Tennyson, but also superior to that of many of the greatest Elizabethan playwrights. He shows a directness and force which is wholly the reverse of the languid style of his narrative poems, and is a testimony of remarkable ability to control style according to the end in view. Finally, the passions and sufferings of Shelley's characters find utterance in passages of lofty declamation that correspond in the realm of eloquence to his flights of lyric ecstasy in the realm of pure poetry. This declamation is fluent, copious, and well adapted to dramatic needs: now impassioned and fiery, now intellectual and ironical, soaring in moods of courage, faltering in moods of pathos; and whatever the situation, always throbbing and pulsing with dramatic feeling.

NOTE ON THE RHYTHM

The rhythm of "The Cenci" shows less marked adaptation to dramatic needs than do the diction and phrasing. In general the metrical flow is smooth, even, and continuous. Out of the total two thousand and thirty lines of blank verse there are only nine which are fragmentary or syllabically defective.¹ Although Rossetti would emend most of these in the interest of regularity, I am convinced that in each instance there is in the original version some direct adaptation to the sense which is lost by alteration. All the cases occur in rapid, interrupted, or informal conversation, and contain partial metrical compensation by pauses or by unusually strong accents. Of hypermetrical lines there are only three,—two Alexandrines and one thirteen-syllable line, each of which is divided among different speakers, and in its irregularity is in keeping with the phrases of confused or impassioned exclamation that it bears.²

¹ I. i. 123, 125; III. i. 59, 270; IV. i. 136; IV. ii. 17; IV. iii. 4; IV. iv. 3; V. ii. 19.

² I. iii. 70; IV. iii. 8; V. iv. 157.

Shelley avails himself frequently of the feminine ending in the more conversational and intellectual speeches, but avoids it in higher emotional and poetic utterance. The list of its proportionate appearance in the lines of all the important characters makes this plain: Judge, 25 per cent.; Savella, 20 per cent.; Camillo, 18 per cent.; Olimpio, 16 per cent.; Marzio, 15 per cent.; Orsino, 14 per cent.; Cenci, 14 per cent.; Bernardo, 14 per cent.; Giacomo, 11 per cent.; Lucretia, 11 per cent.; Beatrice, 9 per cent.

Irregularity in the number and placing of the accents is much greater than in the case of the syllables, but it is hardly greater in "The Cenci" than in the rest of Shelley's poetry or than, indeed, in most non-dramatic English blank verse. In the more impassioned passages, however, by employing spondaic substitution, he sometimes produces very strong, unyielding, dramatic lines.¹

In "The Cenci," as elsewhere, Shelley, like Tennyson, prefers the pause after the even syllables, in contrast to Browning, who so delights in dividing the regular metrical foot. In the extent to which he makes use of the pause Shelley's practice in his different works varies greatly. His early poems, "Queen Mab" and "Alastor," tend to neglect the pause, both at the end of the line and within it. In the "Prometheus Unbound" the pauses are heavier and more frequent, producing a less flowing but weightier rhythm. The first two acts of "The Cenci" reveal a distinctively line rhythm, end-stopped with no internal pause. The lack of this internal pause makes the rhythm less forceful than that of "Prometheus Unbound"; the lack of enjambement makes it less flexible than that of "Alastor." The succession of caesuraless end-stopped lines not infrequently becomes monotonous. It should be noticed, however, that this type of line is chiefly used by Orsino and Cenci, in whose speeches its regularity well expresses cold deliberation and perfect self-control; therefore what is lost in pure poetic beauty is atoned for in these instances by increased characterization. With the beginning of the third act there comes a change in the rhythm coincident with the heightened

¹ III. i. 157; III. ii. 24; IV. ii. 38; V. iv. 67, 79, 118.

emotional content of the drama. Feminine endings and the line without marked internal pause decrease greatly, and the proportion of enjambements increases accordingly; thus a far more irregular, powerful, and flexible rhythm is attained. This phrasal rhythm, in striking contrast to the line rhythm of the earlier part, governs the last three acts of the play.

Shelley's command of melody, in which he is perhaps pre-eminent among English poets, does not forsake him in "The Cenci." Alliteration,¹ transverse alliteration,² internal consonant repetition,³ assonance,⁴ assonance and alliteration combined,⁵ all are used repeatedly and with the ease of a master. The amount of these melodic devices in the various scenes depends upon the emotional intensity of the situation: thus, for example, we find the greatest amount of alliteration in the murder scenes, and in the scene immediately after Count Cenci's violation of Beatrice. But on the whole the melody, like the meter, is not peculiarly dramatic; both are simply dramatically adequate, and their real merit is the merit of beautiful verse in itself.

¹ *E. g.*, I. iii. 101-07, 138-40; III. i. 13-17, 90-98; V. iv. 16-18.

² *E. g.*, I. i. 78; III. i. 209.

³ *E. g.*, I. ii. 5-7; III. i. 12; V. iii. 124; V. iv. 35-38, 64, 144.

⁴ *E. g.*, I. i. 12, 23; I. ii. 10, 57, 88; V. iv. 32, 107.

⁵ V. ii. 144; V. iv. 52.

IX

FINAL SIGNIFICANCE

The dramatic form is usually held to offer the very slightest of opportunities for acquaintance with an author's personality. It is asserted that the drama is a mask behind which the dramatist works, creating characters who may or may not be like himself, expressing thoughts and emotions which may or may not be his own, but affording us no safe criterion by which to distinguish between personal and impersonal elements. Yet, from another point of view, the paradox might be maintained that the drama, instead of being the one artistic form that most conceals the author's personality, is rather the one form that best reveals it. For the drama, more than any other type, makes plain the depth and saneness of the author's understanding of humanity, the real value of his "criticism of life," and the ultimate comprehensiveness of his character. It reveals his personality in the richness or poverty of his experience, and the breadth or limitation of his outlook upon life.

In this respect, none of the technical requirements of the drama are without a larger importance. The successful modern dramatist must be democratic enough to know thoroughly his popular audience, composed of all social classes as it is, and to understand how it will be affected by this or that element in his play; he must be practical enough to overcome the specific difficulties involved in stage presentation; he must be imaginative enough to create mentally a small world of realistic human beings and to guide their lives to a predestined end. He must be able equally to handle events, to reveal the inner lives of his characters, and to depict their outer lives entangled in such complex situations of mutual relationship as those which occur in actual society.

If we have all these requirements in mind, when we are confronted with the work of almost any dramatist, it is probable

that at first we shall be conscious chiefly of its limitations. This is abundantly true in the case of "The Cenci."

At the very outset it is evident that Shelley did not know his audience. This was not necessitated by the fact that he was partially antagonistic toward it: Byron and Ibsen, to name no others, were nineteenth century writers even more antagonistic toward their audience, who yet were able to conquer it and compel its homage, because they understood it better than it understood itself. Shelley had none of this clairvoyant understanding. He deliberately selected for stage representation a subject that could not by any possibility have become popular in the theaters of his own time, and did this without at all comprehending the absoluteness of the inhibition. Because such a subject would have been tolerated by what he, perhaps rightly, considered the more manly Elizabethan audience, he deemed it possible that it might be accepted by that of his own day. Herein he showed his usual complete misconception of the power of contemporary ideas of propriety.

This temperamental failure to realize the force of existing circumstances appears also in the numerous technical defects that unfit "The Cenci" for stage representation. Because Shelley found pure character scenes and long speeches of declamation in the Greek drama, he therefore introduced them in a modern play, written to meet an entirely different set of conditions.

When we come to the imaginative aspects of his work we find a more curious situation. On the one hand, Shelley has failed to grasp the surface requirements of the drama, requirements that many lesser men have been able to master with ease. It is initially apparent that the dramatist should be able to tell a story concisely and rapidly, yet this narrative requirement lies quite beyond Shelley's ability. He cannot develop his plot connectedly; the supreme scenes he shows us, but the intermediate links are lacking.

On the other hand, in the far more difficult task of characterization, he meets with success. The convincingness and moving pathos in the character of Beatrice, and the fearful power in that of Cenci must be admitted. The minor charac-

ters are in the main adequate; their characterization may be thin, but on the whole it is not unreal. Furthermore, the characters in "The Cenci" are truly interrelated as the characters of a drama should be. They remain in our memory not as isolated figures, but as parts of a complicated nexus of human life. The influence of Cenci upon the other characters, and the influence of Beatrice upon them, the relations of Cenci with the Church, the affection between Beatrice and her brothers, the ambition and treachery of Orsino, are all worked out clearly, and combined in the fundamental situation that dominates the play. The emotional intensity of this terrible fundamental situation, as Shelley has been able to bring it home to our consciousness, reveals a genuine and deep dramatic power in the play. This power is not revealed continuously in a logical development of the situation, but it is shown abundantly in all the pivotal scenes.

Thus, while Shelley is weak in handling the elements of dramatic plot, he proves able to create definite characters and to reveal a tragic entanglement by means of powerful individual scenes. Does this justify us in assuming, with Mrs. Shelley, Leigh Hunt and others, that he would ever have become one of the world's greatest dramatists? Such a question of mere possibility, incapable of proof as it is, may seem at first sight rather barren, but it is really of great importance in relation to the main question as to the nature of Shelley's genius.

Unfortunately, there are two clear facts that militate against the view that Shelley's personality was large enough to fill this role which his extreme admirers claim for him. The first is that the characterization in the play is not genuinely objective. In "The Cenci" Shelley chanced upon a theme that superbly illustrated his special theory of life, and the characters correspond to types of humanity continually present in his mind. Tyrants, heroes, and slaves made up his world, a world which, while true enough to certain aspects of real life, was very inadequate as a representation of the whole. We have no sufficient reason to believe that he would ever have worked himself entirely free from this hampering theory. The same types reappear in his later dramas of "Hellas" and "Charles I," and

would probably have continued to characterize his work. The general subjectivity of Shelley has been less dwelt upon by critics than that of Byron, but it was no less prominent, though with the difference that while Byron was chiefly interested in his own concrete personality, Shelley was interested in his own abstract convictions. The artistic limitation, however, probably was, and would have continued to be, about equal in each case. From Byron we could hardly have expected plays which would not have been dominated by his own type of character; from Shelley we should not have been likely to receive plays which would have been free from connection with his narrow social theories.

The second fact which makes against the belief in great dramatic potentiality on the part of Shelley is his almost total lack of development in this respect between 1819 and his death in 1822. During the first two of those three years he made no further attempt in drama—for the two act burlesque of "Swell-foot the Tyrant" in 1820 can hardly be considered such—and when in 1821 he wrote "Hellas" it was to a half lyrical form, like that in the "Prometheus Unbound," that he returned. After deciding to write a stage tragedy upon the subject of Charles I, he allowed more than a year to pass before beginning it. Then having worked upon the new play for the better part of the winter of 1821-22, without having been able to finish even the first act, he cast it aside in order to devote himself to a lyrical drama on the subject of an Indian enchantress. This in turn he abandoned for the still more lyrical narrative of the "Triumph of Life." The five existing scenes of "Charles I" show that Shelley had formed no unified conception even of the first act: they bear little resemblance to the parts of a drama, and are merely interesting studies of successive groups of characters.

In this respect it is interesting to contrast Shelley with two of his rivals in the romantic drama. Byron, in less time than that between "The Cenci" and "Charles I," passed from the dramatically impossible, if poetically successful, "Marino Faliero" to the dramatically successful, if poetically impossible, "Werner." Keats's "Otho the Great" is not more in-

ferior to Shelley's "Cenci," than is Shelley's "Charles I" to Keats's "King Stephen." This is significant of the trend of development in these three poets. To assert absolutely, however, that any one of them was superior in dramatic power to either of the other two would be disputable. Keats undoubtedly possessed a more objective temperament than either of the others, but he nowhere shows a pronounced interest in struggles of the will, and these form the very web and woof of drama. Byron was interested in struggles of the will, but his dominating personality lacked the sympathy essential to a dramatist. Shelley possessed abundant sympathy, but was deficient in any broad knowledge of humanity. No one of them would ever have made a dramatist of the first rank, but each of them might possibly under the most favorable circumstances have become a great playwright of the second rank, of the class, perhaps, of Victor Hugo, or of Schiller.

Although I cannot subscribe to the claims that have been made for "The Cenci" by Shelley's more ardent admirers, I find in it evidence of certain qualities that have been vigorously denied to his genius by those critics who have insisted that his ability was exclusively lyric. Most important of these is sustained power, or something more nearly to be called by that name than anything among the works of Shelley's lyric rivals, Burns, Coleridge, and Keats. The unsatisfactory plot structure of "The Cenci" was due rather to Shelley's inability to master the details of dramatic form than to a falling off, at any point, in his creative impulse. The characterization of the two great protagonists is maintained on the same high level throughout, the rhythm of the blank verse is more highly mastered in the latter half of the play, and the dramatic style reaches its supreme excellence in the very last scene. While "The Cenci" probably originated in a lyric impulse,—the impulse to give expression to the sufferings of the pathetic face that looked out upon Shelley from Guido's picture,—nevertheless a lyric impulse that can adapt itself to a dramatic situation, inspire the utterances of two diametrically opposed characters, and prolong itself without diminution through the length of five acts, bears close resemblance to what we ordinarily mean by sustained poetic power.

"The Cenci" shows, also, unusual artistic self-control. So far as his knowledge of the drama extended, Shelley bent his nature to meet the special requirements of the work he had in hand. The flights of fancy naturally so dear to him were ruthlessly excluded; the aims of Philosophy and Philanthropy, while influencing his conception of the main situation, were never allowed to determine individual speeches; and the characters were not permitted to wander off in their thoughts to the more pleasing realms of imagination, but were compelled to adapt themselves to the grimly realistic situation in which they were placed.

Lastly, keen intellectual power is made evident. This quality has been often denied to Shelley; and yet I do not see how any one can read "The Cenci" without feeling it in almost every line. Shelley's grasp of the significance of his main situation, his insight into the psychology of his chief characters, the lucidity of his style and the subtlety of its abounding tropes, all are indicative of intellectual power. A man who could write over two thousand lines of absolutely clear dramatic verse was not the vague and incoherent dreamer that hostile critics of Shelley would have us see in him.

"The Cenci" appears in the most favorable light when it is considered in connection with the school of English literary drama to which in virtue both of its chronology and of its characteristics it belongs. Shelley did only what the other closet dramatists were trying to do, but he did it much better. They all were subjective, self-conscious, and intellectual poets who made these personal characteristics the leading qualities of their dramas. Their subjectivity appears in the length of the speeches, the constant crowding in of lyrical elements, and the emphasis upon pathos; their self-consciousness appears in the introspective heroes and villains who throng their plays; their intellectuality appears in the choice of subtle themes of general abstract moral interest.

In the first place, "The Cenci," like the rest, deals with themes of abstract moral interest,—the duty to annihilate wickedness regardless of formal ties, and the coexistence of inward righteousness with outward criminality. But these themes,

fortunately, were more fundamental and universal than those which the other closet dramatists succeeded in presenting.

The same peculiar success attended Shelley's creation of character. None of the other self-conscious villains in the English romantic drama attained the realism of Count Cenci, who is their best representative. His colleagues are always a little ridiculous in their parade of wickedness, too extravagant for such mere shadows; he alone is no shadow, but a living being, not to be trifled with, ominous, deadly. The others we can laugh off the stage; Count Cenci is a protagonist who will remain. So also with Shelley's heroine in relation to her rivals in the closet drama. Who remembers now the vaguely outlined Idonea, Dona Theresa, Glycina, Auranthe, and the rest? But Beatrice Cenci appeals to us as a flesh and blood woman whose purity of soul, ascendancy of intellect, and intensity of suffering make her at once an object of true admiration and deep compassion.

From this success in characterization there results one great dramatic difference between "The Cenci" and all the other plays of the romantic school with the exception of Byron's. These others, whether actually performed on the stage, like the plays of Lewis, Sheil, and Maturin, or confined to the closet like "The Borderers" and "Zapolya," all were essentially melodramas, not tragedies. That is to say, in them the action is palpably governed by the will of the author, to whose predetermined arrangement of the play the realism of the characters is sacrificed. In "The Cenci," on the other hand, it is the plot which is sacrificed to the characters, and this, if also a defect, is yet a far nobler one, for it lies on the side of tragedy. Such action as there is in "The Cenci" depends upon the characters, and is the result of the forces of their warring natures, not of the author's interpolating hand, intent upon the proper outcome of his story.

Finally, in another important respect Shelley did what his contemporary rivals of the closet drama were trying to do, and did it better. They all were great poets, and in their dramas they strove primarily to produce verse which should endure as great literature. In this regard Shelley succeeded far better

than any of the others. I think it might even be successfully maintained that of all the English poets of the nineteenth century who essayed drama, Shelley was able to create the most powerful dramatic style, and the most adequate dramatic blank verse. The best line of "The Borderers" is hardly better than the worst line of "The Cenci"; a few passages in Coleridge are more sonorous than anything in Shelley, but most of Coleridge's dramatic verse is far too flaccid and sentimental to stand comparison with the direct earnestness of "The Cenci"; Keats's dramatic style is too luscious, and lacks the realism of Shelley's; Byron's is more vigorous, but unmelodious and unrhythmical; Browning's is more intense, but less natural, and less lucid; Tennyson's is as lucid, but less vigorous, and less eloquent. In every case the balance seems to incline towards Shelley.

In spite of its defects, "The Cenci" remains a great work of art. Although Shelley failed, through ignorance and incapacity, in his initial purpose of writing a play suitable for the stage, he succeeded, through his deep emotional and imaginative sympathy with his subject, in writing a dramatic poem which must take rank among the chief English literary works of his era.

VITA

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